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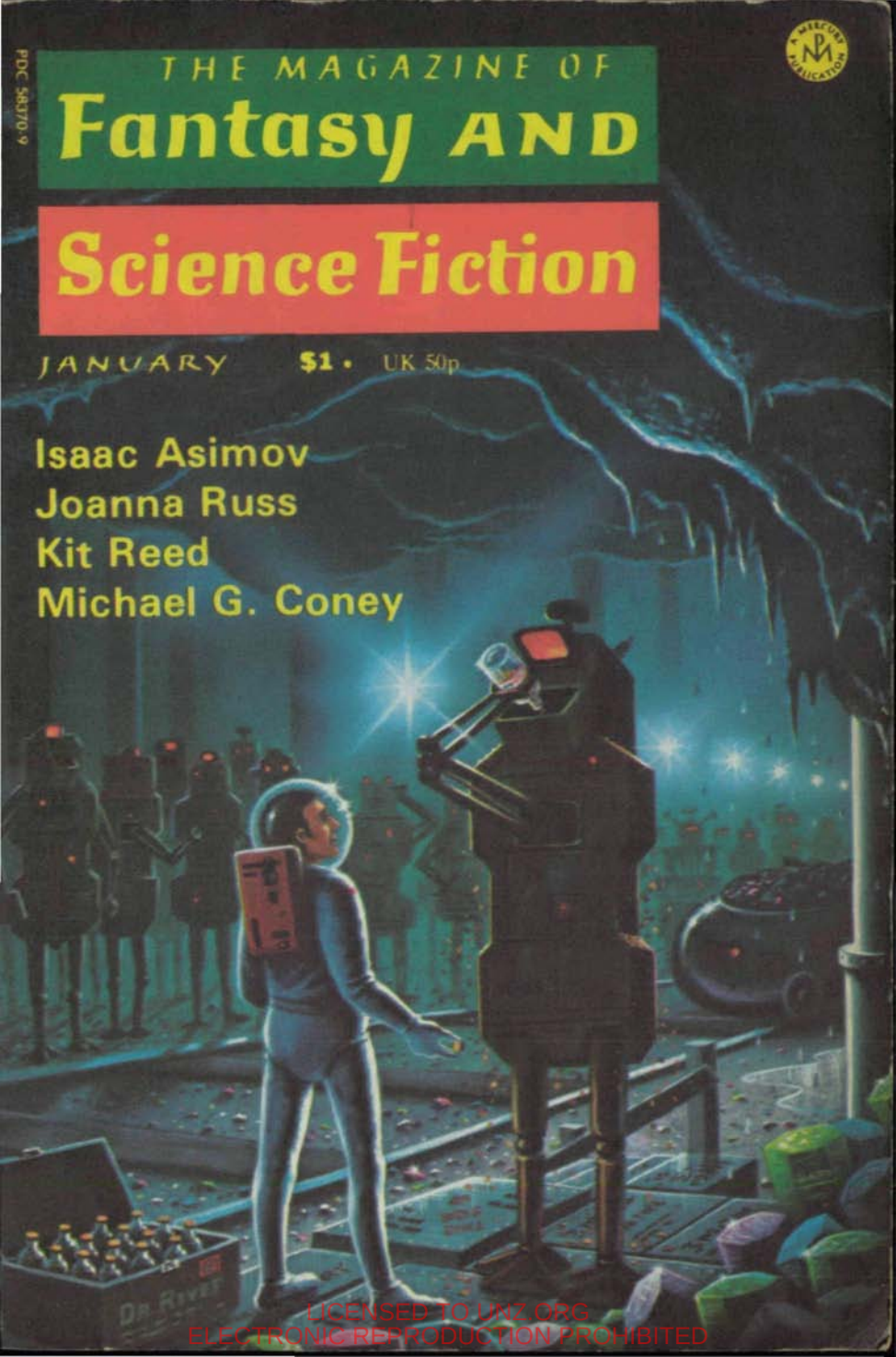

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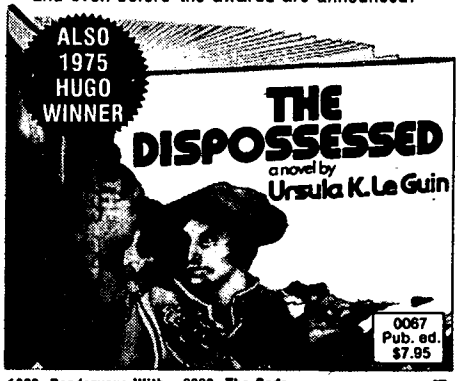

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Joanna Russ's latest story concerns three teen-agers in a 1950s high school and a row in an old wooden boat. It moves from there to places less mundane, to Atlantis, to the stars, and along the way makes some penetrating observations about "fantasy" and "real life."

My Boat

by JOANNA RUSS

Milty, have I got a story for you!

No, sit down. Enjoy the cream cheese and bagel. I guarantee this one will make a first-class TV movie; I'm working on it already. Small cast, cheap production — it's a natural. See, we start with this crazy chick, maybe about seventeen, but she's a waif, she's withdrawn from the world, see? She's had some kind of terrible shock. And she's fixed up this old apartment in a slum really weird, like a fantasy world — long, blonde hair, maybe goes around barefoot in tie-dyed dresses she makes out of old sheets, and there's this account executive who meets her in Central Park and falls in love with her on account of she's like a dryad or a nature spirit —

All right. So it stinks. I'll pay for my lunch. We'll pretend you're not my agent, okay? And you don't have to tell me it's been done; I know it's been done. The truth is —

Milty, I have to talk to someone. No, it's a lousy idea, I know and I'm not working on it and I haven't been working on it, but what are you going to do Memorial Day weekend if you're alone and everybody's out of town?

I have to talk to someone.

Yes, I'll get off the Yiddische shtick. Hell, I don't think about it; I just fall into it sometimes when I get upset, you know how it is. You do it yourself. But I want to tell you a story and it's not a story for a script. It's something that happened to me in high school in 1952 and *I just want to tell someone.* I don't care if no station from here to Indonesia can use it; you just tell me whether I'm nuts or not, that's all.

Okay.

It was 1952, like I said. I was a senior in a high school out on the Island, a public high school but very fancy, a big drama program.

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They were just beginning to integrate, you know, the early fifties, very liberal neighborhood; everybody's patting everybody else on the back because they let five black kids into our school. Five out of eight hundred! You'd think they expected God to come down from Flatbush and give everybody a big fat golden halo.

Anyway, our drama class got integrated, too — one little black girl aged fifteen named Cissie Jackson, some kind of genius. All I remember the first day of the spring term, she was the only black I'd ever seen with a natural, only we didn't know what the hell it was, then; it made her look as weird as if she'd just come out of a hospital or something.

Which, by the way, she just had. You know Malcolm X saw his father killed by white men when he was four and that made him a militant for life? Well, Cissie's father had been shot down in front of her eyes when she was a little kid — we learned that later on — only it didn't make her militant; it just made her so scared of everybody and everything that she'd withdraw into herself and wouldn't speak to anybody for weeks on end. Sometimes she'd withdraw right out of this world and then they'd send her to the loony bin; believe me, it was all over school in two days. And she looked it; she'd sit up there in the school theater — oh, Milty, the Island high schools had *money*, you better believe it! — and try to disappear into the last seat like some little scared rabbit. She was only four eleven anyhow, and maybe eighty-five pounds sopping wet. So maybe that's why she didn't become a militant. Hell, that had nothing to do with it. She was scared of *everybody*. It wasn't just the white-black thing, either; I once saw her in a corner with one of the other black students: real uptight, respectable boy, you know, suit and white shirt and tie, hair straightened the way they did then with a lot of grease and carrying a new briefcase, too, and he was talking to her about something as if his life depended on it. He was actually crying and pleading with her. And all she did was shrink back into the corner as if she'd like to disappear and shake her head No No No. She always talked in a whisper unless she was on stage and sometimes then, too. The first week she forgot her cues four times — just stood there, glazed over, ready to fall through the floor — and a couple of times she just wandered off the set as if the play was over, right in the middle of a scene.

So Al Coppolino and I went to the principal. I'd always thought Alan was pretty much a fruitcake himself — remember, Milty this is 1952 — because he used to read all

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that crazy stuff, The Cult of Chthulhu, Dagon Calls, The Horror Men of Leng — yeah, I remember that H.P. Lovecraft flick you got 10 percent on for Hollywood *and* TV *and* reruns — but what did we know? Those days you went to parties, you got excited from dancing cheek to cheek, girls wore ankle socks and petticoats to stick their skirts out, and if you wore a sport shirt to school that was okay because Central High was liberal, but it better not have a pattern on it. Even so, I knew Al was a bright kid and I let him do most of the talking; I just nodded a lot. I was a big nothing in those days.

Al said, "Sir, Jim and I are all for integration and we think it's great that this is a really liberal place, but — uh —"

The principal got that look. Uh-oh.

"But?" he said, cold as ice.

"Well, sir," said Al, "it's Cissie Jackson. We think she's — um — sick. I mean wouldn't it be better if ... I mean everybody says she's just come out of the hospital and it's a strain for all of us and it must be a lot worse strain for her and maybe it's a strain for all of us and it must be a lot worse strain for her and maybe it's just a little soon for her to —"

"Sir," I said, "what Coppolino means is, we don't mind integrating blacks with whites, but this isn't racial integration, sir; this is integrating normal people with a filbert. I mean —"

He said, "Gentlemen, it might interest you to know that Miss Cecilia Jackson has higher scores on her IQ tests than the two of you put together. And I am told by the drama department that she has also more talent than the two of you put together. And considering the grades both of you have managed to achieve in the fall term, I'm not at all surprised."

Al said under his breath, "Yeah, and fifty times as many problems."

Well, the principal went on and told us about how we should welcome this chance to work with her because she was so brilliant she was positively a genius, and that as soon as we stopped spreading idiotic rumors, the better chance Miss Jackson would have to adjust to Central, and if he heard anything about our bothering her again or spreading stories about her, both of us were going to get it but good, and maybe we would even be expelled.

And then his vioce lost the ice, and he told us about some white cop shooting her pa for no reason at all when she was five, right in front of her, and her pa bleeding into the gutter and dying in little Cissie's lap, and how poor her mother was, and a couple of other awful things

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that had happened to her, and if *that* wasn't enough to drive anybody crazy — though he said "cause problems," you know — anyhow, by the time he'd finished, I felt like a rat and Coppolino went outside the principal's office, put his face down against the tiles — they always had tiles up as high as you could reach, so they could wash off the graffiti, though we didn't use the word "graffiti" in those days — and he blubbered like a baby.

So we started a Help Cecilia Jackson campaign.

And by God, Milty, could that girl *act*! She wasn't reliable, that was the trouble; one week she'd be in there, working like a dog, voice exercises, gym, fencing, reading Stanislavsky in the cafeteria, gorgeous performances, the next week: nothing. Oh, she was there in the flesh, all right, all eighty-five pounds of her, but she would walk through everything as if her mind was someplace else: technically perfect, emotionally nowhere. I heard later those were also the times when she'd refuse to answer questions in history or geography classes, just fade out and not talk. But when she was concentrating, she could walk onto that stage and take it over as if she owned it. I never saw such a natural. At fifteen! And tiny. I mean not a particularly good voice — though I guess just getting older would've helped that — and a figure that, frankly, Milt, it was the old W.C. Fields joke, two aspirins on an ironing board. And tiny, no real good looks, but my God, you know and I know that doesn't matter if you've got the presence. And she had it to burn. She played the Queen of Sheba once, in a one-act play we put on before a live audience — all right, our parents and the other kids, who else? — and she *was* the role. And another time I saw her do things from Shakespeare. And once, of all things, a lioness in a mime class. She had it all. Real, absolute, pure concentration. And she was smart, too; by then she and Al had become pretty good friends; I once heard her explain to him (that was in the green room the afternoon of the Queen of Sheba thing when she was taking off her make-up with cold cream) just how she'd figured out each bit of business for the character. Then she stuck her whole arm out at me, pointing straight at me as if her arm was a machine gun, and said:

"For you, Mister Jim, let me tell you: the main thing is *belief*!"

It was a funny thing, Milt. She got better and better friends with Al, and when they let me tag along, I felt privileged. He loaned her some of those crazy books of his and I overheard things about her

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life, bits and pieces. That girl had a mother who was so uptight and so God-fearing and so respectable it was a wonder Cissie could even breathe without asking permission. Her mother wouldn't even let her straighten her hair — not ideological reasons, you understand, not then, but because — get this — *Cissie was too young*. I think her mamma must've been crazier than she was. Course I was a damn stupid kid (who wasn't?) and I really thought all blacks were real loose; they went around snapping their fingers and hanging from chandeliers, you know, all that stuff, dancing and singing. But here was this genius from a family where they wouldn't let her out at night; she wasn't allowed to go to parties or dance or play cards; she couldn't wear make-up or even jewelry. Believe me, I think if anything drove her batty it was being socked over the head so often with a Bible. I guess her imagination just had to find some way out. Her mother, by the way, would've dragged her out of Central High by the hair if she'd found out about the drama classes; we all had to swear to keep that strictly on the q.t. The theater was even more sinful and wicked than dancing, I guess.

You know, I think it shocked me. It really did, Al's family was sort-of-nothing-really Catholic and mine was sort-of-nothing Jewish. I'd never met anybody with a mamma like that. I mean she would've beaten Cissie up if Cissie had ever come home with a gold circle pin on that white blouse she wore day in and day out; you remember the kind all the girls wore. And of course there were no horsehair petticoats for Miss Jackson; Miss Jackson wore pleated skirts that were much too short, even for her, and straight skirts that looked faded and all bunched up. For a while I had some vague idea that the short skirts meant she was daring, you know, sexy, but it wasn't that; they were from a much younger cousin, let down. She just couldn't afford her own clothes. I think it was the mamma and the Bible business that finally made me stop seeing Cissie as the Integration Prize Nut we had to be nice to because of the principal or the scared little rabbit who still, by the way, whispered everyplace but in drama class. I just saw Cecilia Jackson plain, I guess, not that it lasted for more than a few minutes, but I knew she was something special. So one day in the hall, going from one class to another, I met her and Al and I said, "Cissie, your name is going to be up there in lights someday. I think you're the best actress I ever met and I just want to say it's a privilege knowing you." And then I swept her a big

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corny bow, like Errol Flynn.

She looked at Al and Al looked at her, sort of sly. Then she let down her head over her books and giggled. She was so tiny you sometimes wondered how she could drag those books around all day; they hunched her over so.

Al said, "Aw, come on. Let's tell him."

So they told me their big secret. Cissie had a girl cousin named Gloriette, and Gloriette and Cissie together owned an honest-to-God slip for a boat in the marina out in Silverhampton. Each of them paid half the slip fee — which was about two bucks a month then, Milt — you have to remember that a marina then just meant a long wooden dock you could tie your rowboat up to.

"Gloriette's away," said Cissie, in that whisper. "She had to go visit auntie, in Carolina. And mamma's goin' to follow her next week on Sunday."

"So we're going to go out in the boat!" Al finished it for her. "You wanna come?"

"Sunday?"

"Sure, mamma will go to the bus station after church," said Cissie. "That's about one o'clock. Aunt Evelyn comes to take care of me at nine. So we have eight hours.

"And it takes two hours to get there," said Al. "First you take the subway; then you take a bus —"

"Unless we use your car, Jim!" said Cissie, laughing so hard she dropped her books.

"Well, thanks very much!" I said. She scooped them up again and smiled at me. "No, Jim," she said. "We want you to come, anyway. Al never saw the boat yet. Gloriette and me, we call it *My Boat.*" Fifteen years old and she knew how to smile at you so's to twist your heart like a pretzel. Or maybe I just thought: what a wicked secret to have! A big sin, I guess, according to her family.

I said, "Sure, I'll drive you. May I ask what kind of boat it is, Miss Jackson?"

"Don't be so *damn'* silly," she said daringly. "I'm Cissie or Cecilia. Silly Jim."

"And as for *My Boat,*" she added, "it's a big yacht. Enormous."

I was going to laugh at that, but then I saw she meant it. No, she was just playing. She was smiling wickedly at me again. She said we should meet at the bus stop near her house, and then she went down the tiled hall next to skinny little Al Coppolino, in her old, baggy, green skirt and her always-the-same white blouse. No beautiful, big, white, sloppy bobby socks for Miss Jackson; she just wore old loafers coming apart at the seams. She looked different, though: her head was up, her step springy, and she

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hadn't been whispering.

And then it occurred to me it was the first time I had ever seen her smile or laugh — off stage. Mind you, she cried easily enough, like the time in class she realized from something the teacher had said that Anton Chekhov you know; the great Russian playwright — was dead. I heard her telling Alan later that she didn't believe it. There were lots of little crazy things like that.

Well, I picked her up Sunday in what was probably the oldest car in the world, even then — not a museum piece, Milty; it'd still be a mess — frankly I was lucky to get it started at all — and when I got to the bus station near Cissie's house in Brooklyn, there she was in her faded, hand-me-down, pleated skirt and that same blouse. I guess little elves named Cecilia Jackson came out of the woodwork every night and washed and ironed it. Funny, she and Al really did make a pair — you know, he was like the Woody Allen of Central High and I think he went in for his crazy books — sure, Milt, *very* crazy in 1952 — because otherwise what could a little Italian plunk do who was five foot three and so brilliant no other kid could understand half the time what he was talking about? I don't know why I was friends with him; I think it made me feel big, you know, generous and good, like being friends with Cissie. They were almost the same size, waiting there by the bus stop, and I think their heads were in the same place. I know it now. I guess he was just a couple of decades ahead of himself, like his books. And maybe if the civil rights movement had started a few years earlier —

Anyway, we drove out to Silverhampton and it was a nice drive, lots of country, though all flat — in those days there were still truck farms on the Island — and found the marina, which was nothing more than a big old quay, but sound enough; and I parked the car and Al took out a shopping bag Cissie'd been carrying. "Lunch," he said.

My Boat was there, all right, halfway down the dock. Somehow I hadn't expected it would exist, even. It was an old leaky wooden rowboat with only one oar, and there were three inches of bilge in the bottom. On the bow somebody had painted the name, "My Boat," shakily in orange paint. *My Boat* was tied to the mooring by a rope about as sturdy as a piece of string. Still, it didn't look like it would sink right away; after all, it'd been sitting there for months, getting rained on, maybe even snowed on, and it was still floating. So I stepped down into it, wishing I'd had the sense to take off my shoes, and started bailing with a tin can

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I'd brought from the car. Alan and Cissie were taking things out of the bag in the middle of the boat. I guess they were setting out lunch. It was pretty clear that *My Boat* spent most of its time sitting at the dock while Cissie and Gloriette ate lunch and maybe pretended they were on the *Queen Mary*, because neither Alan nor Cissie seemed to notice the missing oar. It was a nice day but in-and-outish; you know, clouds one minute, sun the next, but little fluffy clouds, no sign of rain. I bailed a lot of the gunk out and then moved up into the bow, and as the sun came out I saw that I'd been wrong about the orange paint. It was yellow.

Then I looked closer: it wasn't paint but something set into the side of *My Boat* like the names on people's office doors; I guess I must've not looked too closely the first time. It was a nice, flowing script, a real professional job. Brass, I guess. Not a plate, Milt, kind of — what do they call it, parquet? Intaglio? Each letter was put in separately. Must've been Alan; he had a talent for stuff like that, used to make weird illustrations for his crazy books. I turned around to find Al and Cissie taking a big piece of cheesecloth out of the shopping bag and drapling it over high poles that were built into the sides of the boat. They were making a kind of awning. I said:

"Hey, I bet you took that from the theater shop!"

She just smiled.

Al said, "Would you get us some fresh water, Jim?"

"Sure," I said. "Where, up the dock?"

"No, from the bucket. Back in the stern. Cissie says it's marked."

Oh, sure, I thought, sure. Out in the middle of the Pacific we set out our bucket and pray for rain. There was a pail there all right, and somebody had laboriously stenciled "Fresh Water" on it in green paint, sort of smudgy, but that pail was never going to hold anything ever again. It was bone-dry, empty, and so badly rusted that when you held it up to the light, you could see through the bottom in a couple of places. I said, "Cissie, it's empty."

She said, "Look again, Jim."

I said, "But look, Cissie —" and turned the bucket upside-down.

Cold water drenched me from my knees to the soles of my shoes.

"See?" she said. "Never empty." I thought: Hell, I didn't look. that's all. Maybe it rained yesterday. Still, a full pail of water is heavy and I had lifted that thing with one finger. I set it down — if it had been full before, it certainly wasn't now — and looked again.

It was full, right to the brim. I dipped my hand into the stuff and drank a little of it: cold and clear as spring water and it smelled — I

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don't know — of ferns warmed by the sun, of raspberries, of field flowers, of grass. I thought: my God, I'm becoming a filbert myself! And then I turned around and saw that Alan and Cissie had replaced the cheesecloth on the poles with a striped blue-and-white awning, the kind you see in movies about Cleopatra, you know? The stuff they put over her barge to keep the sun off. And Cissie had taken out of her shopping bag something patterned orange-and-green-and-blue and had wrapped it around her old clothes. She had on gold-colored earrings, big hoop things, and a black turban over that funny hair. And she must've put her loafers somewhere because she was barefoot. Then I saw that she had one shoulder bare, too, and I sat down on one of the marble benches of *My Boat* under the awning because I was probably having hallucinations. I mean she hadn't had *time* — and where were her old clothes? I thought to myself that they must've lifted a whole bagful of stuff from the theater shop, like that big old wicked-looking knife she had stuck into her amber-studded, leather belt, the hilt all covered with gold and stones: red ones, green ones, and blue ones with little crosses of light winking in them that you couldn't really follow with your eyes. I didn't know what the blue ones were then, but I know now. You don't make star sapphires in a theater shop. Or a ten-inch, crescent-shaped steel blade so sharp the sun dazzles you coming off its edge.

I said, "Cissie, you look like the Queen of Sheba."

She smiled. She said to me, "Jim, iss not Shee-bah as in thee Bible, but Saba. Sah-bah. You mus' remember when we meet her."

I thought to myself: Yeah, this is where little old girl genius Cissie Jackson comes to freak out every Sunday. Lost weekend. I figured this was the perfect time to get away, make some excuse, you know, and call her mamma or her auntie, or maybe just the nearest hospital. I mean just for her own sake; Cissie wouldn't hurt anybody because she wasn't mean, not ever. And anyhow she was too little to hurt anyone. I stood up.

Her eyes were level with mine. And she was standing below me.

Al said, "Be careful, Jim. Look again. Always look again." I went back to the stern. There was the bucket that said "Fresh Water," but as I looked the sun came out and I saw I'd been mistaken; it wasn't old, rusty, galvanized iron with splotchy, green-painted letters.

It was silver, pure silver. It was sitting in a sort of marble well built into the stern, and the letters were jade inlay. It was still full. It would

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always be full. I looked back at Cissie standing under the blue-and-white-striped silk awning with her star sapphires and emeralds and rubies in her dagger and her funny talk — I know it now, Milt, it was West Indian, but I didn't then — and I knew as sure as if I'd seen it that if I looked at the letters "My Boat" in the sun, they wouldn't be brass but pure gold. And the wood would be ebony. I wasn't even surprised. Although everything had changed, you understand, I'd never seen it change; it was either that I hadn't looked carefully the first time, or I'd made a mistake, or I hadn't noticed something, or I'd just forgotten. Like what I thought had been an old crate in the middle of *My Boat*, which was really the roof of a cabin with little portholes in it, and looking in I saw three bunk beds below, a closet, and a beautiful little galley with a refrigerator and a stove, and off to one side in the sink, where I couldn't really see it clearly, a bottle with a napkin around its neck, sticking up from an ice bucket full of crushed ice, just like an old Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers movie. And the whole inside of the cabin was paneled in teakwood.

Cissie said, "No, Jim. Is not teak. Is cedar, from Lebanon. You see now why I cannot take seriously in this school this nonsense about places and where they are and what happen in them. Crude oil in Lebanon! It is cedar they have. And ivory. I have been there many, many time. I have talk' with the wise Solomon. I have been at court of Queen of Saba and have made eternal treaty with the Knossos women, the people of the double ax which is waxing and waning moon together. I have visit Akhnaton and Nofretari, and have seen great kings at Benin and at Dar. I even go to Atlantis, where the Royal Couple teach me many things. The priest and priestess, they show me how to make *My Boat* go anywhere I like, even under the sea. Oh, we have manhy improvin' chats upon roof of Pahlahss at dusk!"

It was real. It was all real. She was not fifteen, Milt. She sat in the bow at the controls of *My Boat*, and there were as many dials and toggles and buttons and switches and gauges on that thing as on a B-57. And she was at least ten years older. Al Coppolino, too, he looked like a picture I'd seen in a history book of Sir Francis Drake, and he had long hair and a little pointy beard. He was dressed like Drake, except for the ruff, with rubies in his ears and rings all over his fingers, and he, too, was no seventeen-year-old. He had a faint scar running from his left temple at the hairline down past his eye to his cheekbone. I could also see that

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under her turban Cissie's hair was braided in some very fancy way. I've seen it since. Oh, long before everybody was doing "corn rows." I saw it at the Metropolitan Museum, in silver face-mask sculptures from the city of Benin, in Africa. Old, Milt, centuries old.

Al said, "I know of other places, Princess. I can show them to you. Oh, let us go to Ooth-Nargai and Celephais the Fair, and Kadath in the Cold Waste — it's a fearful place, Jim, but *we* need not be afraid — and then we will go to the city of Ulthar, where is the very fortunate and lovely law that no man or woman may kill or annoy a cat."

"The Atlanteans," said Cissie in a deep sweet voice, "they promise' that next time they show me not jus' how to go undersea. They say if you think hard, if you fix much, if you believe, then can make *My Boat* go straight up. Into the stars, Jim!"

Al Coppolino was chanting names under his breath: Cathuria, Sona-Nyl, Thalarion, Zar, Baharna, Nir, Oriab. All out of those books of his.

Cissie said, "Before you come with us, you must do one last thing, Jim. Untie the rope."

So I climed down *My Boat's* ladder onto the quay and undid the braided gold rope that was fastened to the slip. Gold and silk intertwined, Milt; it rippled through my hand as if it were alive; I know the hard, slippery feel of silk. I was thinking of Atlantis and Celephais and going up into the stars, and all of it was mixed up in my head with the senior prom and college, because I had been lucky enough to be accepted by The-College-Of-My-Choice, and what a future I'd have as a lawyer, a corporation lawyer, after being a big gridiron star, of course. Those were my plans in the old days. Dead certainties every one, right? Versus a thirty-five-foot yacht that would've make John D. Rockefeller turn green with envy and places in the world where nobody'd ever been and nobody'd ever go again. Cissie and Al stood on deck above me, the both of them looking like something out of a movie — beautiful and dangerous and very strange — and suddenly I knew I didn't want to go. Part of it was the absolute certainty that if I ever offended Cissie in any way — I don't mean just a quarrel or disagreement or something you'd get the sulks about, but a real bone-deep kind of offense — I'd suddenly find myself in a leaky rowboat with only one oar in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Or maybe just tied up at the dock at Silverhampton; Cissie wasn't mean. At least I hoped so. I just — I guess I didn't feel *good* enough to go. And there was

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something about their faces, too, as if over both of them, but especially over Cissie's, like clouds, like veils, there swam other faces, other expressions, other souls, other pasts and futures and other kinds of knowledge, all of them shifting like a heat mirage over an asphalt road on a hot day.

I didn't want that knowledge, Milt. I didn't want to go that deep. It was the kind of thing most seventeen-year-olds don't learn for years: Beauty. Despair. Mortality. Compassion. Pain.

And I was still looking up at them, watching the breeze fill out Al Coppolino's plum-colored velvet cloak and shine on his silver-and-black doublet, when a big, heavy, hard, fat hand clamped down on my shoulder and a big, fat, nasty, heavy, Southern voice said:

"Hey, boy, you got no permit for this slip! What's that rowboat doin' out there? And what's yo' name?"

So I turned and found myself looking into the face of the great-granddaddy of all Southern red-neck sheriffs: face like a bulldog with jowls to match, and sunburnt red, and fat as a pig, and mountain-mean. I said, "Sir?" — every high-school kid could say that in his sleep in those days — and then we turned toward the bay, me saying, "What boat sir?" and the cop saying just, "What the —"

Because there was nothing there. *My Boat* was gone. There was only a blue shimmering stretch of bay. They weren't out further and they weren't around the other side of the dock — the cop and I both ran around — and by the time I had presence of mind enough to look up at the sky —

Nothing. A seagull. A cloud. A plane out of Idlewild. Besides, hadn't Cissie said she didn't yet know how to go straight up into the stars?

No, nobody ever saw *My Boat* again. Or Miss Cecilia Jackson, complete nut and girl genius, either. Her mamma came to school and I was called into the principal's office. I told them a cooked-up story, the one I'd been going to tell the cop: that they'd said they were just going to row around the dock and come back, and I'd left to see if the car was okay in the parking lot, and when I came back, they were gone. For some crazy reason I *still* thought Cissie's mamma would look like Aunt Jemima, but she was a thin little woman, very like her daughter, and as nervous and uptight as I ever saw: a tiny lady in a much-pressed, but very clean, gray business suit, like a teacher's, you know, worn-out shoes, a blouse with a while frill at the neck, a straw hat with a white band, and proper white gloves. I think

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Cissie knew what I expected her mamma to be and what a damned fool I was, even considering your run-of-the-mill, seventeen-year-old, white, liberal racist, and that's why she didn't take me along.

The cop? He followed me to my car, and by the time I got there — I was sweating and crazy scared —

He was gone, too. Vanished.

I think Cissie created him. Just for a joke.

So Cissie never came back. And I couldn't convince Mrs. Jackson that Alan Coppolino, boy rapist, hadn't carried her daughter off to some lonely place and murdered her. I tried and tried, but Mrs. Jackson would never believe me.

It turned out there was no Cousin Gloriette.

Alan? Oh, he came back. But it took him a while. A long, long while. I saw him yesterday, Milt, on the Brooklyn subway. A skinny, short guy with ears that stuck out, still wearing the sport shirt and pants he'd started out in, that Sunday more than twenty years ago, and with the real 1950's haircut nobody would wear today. Quite a few people were staring at him, in fact.

The thing is, Milt, *he was still seventeen.*

No, I know it wasn't some other kid. Because he was waving at me and smiling fit to beat the band. And when I got out with him at his old stop, he started asking after everybody in Central High just as if it had been a week later, or maybe only a day. Though when I asked him where the hell he'd been for twenty years, he wouldn't tell me. He only said he'd forgotten something. So we went up five flights to his old apartment, the way we used to after school for a couple of hours before his mom and dad came home from work. He had the old key in his pocket. And it was just the same, Milt: the gas refrigerator, the exposed pipes under the sink, the summer slipcovers nobody uses any more, the winter drapes put away, the valance over the window muffled in a sheet, the bare parquet floors, and the old linoleum in the kitchen. Every time I'd ask him a question, he'd only smile. He knew me, though, because he called me by name a couple of times. I said, "How'd you recognize me?" and he said, "Recognize? You haven't changed." Haven't changed, my God. Then I said, "Look, Alan, what did you come back for?" and with a grin just like Cissie's, he said, "*The Necronomicon* by the mad Arab, Abdul Alhazred, what else?" but I saw the book he took with him and it was a different one. He was careful to get just the right one, looked through every shelf in the bookcase in his bedroom. There

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were still college banners all over the walls of his room. I know the book now, by the way; it was the one you wanted to make into a quick script last year for the guy who does the Poe movies, only I *told* you it was all special effects and animation: exotic islands, strange worlds, and the monsters' costumes alone — sure, H.P. Lovecraft. "The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath." He didn't say a word after that. Just walked down the five flights with me behind him and then along the old block to the nearest subway station, but of course by the time I reached the bottom of the subway steps, he wasn't there.

His apartment? You'll never find it. When I raced back up, even the house was gone. More than that, Milt, the street is gone; the address doesn't exist any more; it's all part of the new expressway now.

Which is why I called you. My God, I had to tell somebody! By now those two psychiatric cases are voyaging around between the stars to Ulthar and Ooth-Nargai and Dylath-Leen —

But they're not psychiatric cases. *It really happened.*

So if they're not psychiatric cases, what does that make you and me? Blind men?

I'll tell you something else, Milt: meeting Al reminded me of what Cissie once said before the whole thing with *My Boat* but after we'd become friends enough for me to ask her what had brought her out of the hospital. I didn't ask it like that and she didn't answer it like that, but what it boiled down to was that sooner or later, at every place she visited, she'd meet a bleeding man with wounds in his hands and feet who would tell her, "Cissie, go back, you're needed; Cissie, go back, you're needed." I was fool enough to ask her if he was a white man or a black man. She just glared at me and walked away. Now wounds in the hands and feet, you don't have to look far to tell what that means to a Christian, Bible-raised girl. What I wonder is: will she meet Him again, out there among the stars? If things get bad enough for black power or women's liberation, or even for people who write crazy books, I don't know what, will *My Boat* materialize over Times Square or Harlem or East New York with an Ethiopian warrior-queen in it and Sir Francis Drake Coppolino, and God-only-knows-what kind of weapons from the lost science of Atlantis? I tell you, I wouldn't be surprised. I really wouldn't. I only hope He — or Cissie's idea of him — decides that things are still okay, and they can go on visiting all those places in Al Coppolino's book. I tell you, I hope that book is a *long* book.

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Still, if I could do it again ....

Milt, it is not a story. *It happened.* For instance, tell me one thing, how did she know the name Nofretari? That's the Egyptian Queen Nefertiti, that's how we all learned it, but how could she know the real name decades, literally decades, before anybody else? And Saba? That's real, too. And Benin? We didn't have any courses in African History in Central High, not in 1952! And what about the double-headed ax of the Cretans at Knossos? Sure, we read about Crete in high school, but nothing in our history books ever told us about the matriarchy or the labyris, that's the name of the ax. Milt, I tell you, there is even a women's lib bookstore in Manhattan *called* —

Have it your own way.

Oh, sure. She wasn't black; she was green. It'd make a great TV show. Green, blue, and rainbow-colored. I'm sorry, Milty, I know you're my agent and you've done a lot of work for me and I haven't sold much lately. I've been reading. No, nothing you'd like: existentialism, history, Marxism, some Eastern stuff —

Sorry, Milt, but we writers do read every once in a while. It's this little vice we have. I've been trying to dig deep, like Al Coppolino, though maybe in a different way.

Okay, so you want to have this Martian, who wants to invade Earth, so he turns himself into a beautiful, tanned girl with long, straight, blonde hair, right? And becomes a high-school student in a rich school in Westchester. And this beautiful blonde girl Martian has to get into all the local organizations like the women's consciousness-raising groups and the encounter therapy stuff and the cheerleaders and the kids who push dope, so he — she, rather — can learn about the Earth mentality. Yeah. And of course she has to seduce the principal and the coach and all the big men on campus, so we can make it into a series, even a sitcom maybe; each week this Martian falls in love with an Earth man or she tries to do something to destroy Earth or blow up something, using Central High for a base. Can I use it? Sure I can! It's beautiful. It's right in my line. I can work in everything I just told you. Cissie was right not to take me along; I've got spaghetti where my backbone should be.

Nothing. I didn't say anything. Sure. It's a great idea. Even if we only get a pilot out of it.

No, Milt, honestly, I really think it has this fantastic spark. A real touch of genius. It'll sell like crazy. Yeah, I can manage an idea sheet by Monday. Sure. "The Beautiful Menace from Mars?" Un-huh. Absolutely. It's got sex, it's got danger, comedy, everything; we

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could branch out into the lives of the teachers, the principal, the other kid's parents. Bring in contemporary problems like drug abuse. Sure. Another Peyton Place. I'll even move to the West Coast again. You are a genius.

Oh my God.

Nothing. Keep on talking. It's just — see that little skinny kid in the next booth down? The one with the stuck-out ears and the old-fashioned haircut? You don't? Well, I think you're just not looking properly, Milt. Actually I don't think I was, either; he must be one of the Met extras, you know, they come out sometimes during the intermission: all that Elizabethan stuff, the plum-colored cloak, the calf-high boots, the silver-and-black — As a matter of fact, I just remembered — the Met moved uptown a couple of years ago, so he couldn't be dressed like that, could he?

You still can't see him? I'm not surprised. The Light's very bad in here. Listen, he's an old friend — I mean he's the son of an old friend — I better go over and say hello, I won't be a minute.

Milt, this young man is important! I mean he's connected with somebody very important. Who? One of the biggest and best producers in the world, that's who! He — uh — they — wanted me to — you might call it do a script for them, yeah. I didn't want to at the time, but —

No, no, you stay right here. I'll just sort of lean over and say hello. You keep on talking about the Beautiful Menace from Mars; I can listen from there; I'll just tell him they can have me if they want me.

Your ten per cent? Of course you'll get your ten per cent. You're my agent, aren't you? Why, if it wasn't for you, I just possible might not have — Sure, you'll get your ten percent. Spend it on anything you like: ivory, apes, peacocks, spices, and Lebanese cedarwood!

All you have to do is collect it.

But keep on talking, Milty, won't you? Somehow I want to go over to the next booth with the sound of your voice in my ears. Those beautiful ideas. So original. So creative. So true. Just what the public wants. Of course there's a difference in the way people perceive things, and you and I, I think we perceive them differently, you know? Which is why you are a respected, successful agent and I — well, let's skip it. It wouldnt be complimentary to either of us.

Huh? Oh, nothing. I didn't say anything. I'm listening. Over my shoulder. Just keep on talking while I say hello and my deepest and most abject apologies, Sir Alan Coppolino. Heard the name before, Milt? No? I'm not surprised.

You just keep on talking ....

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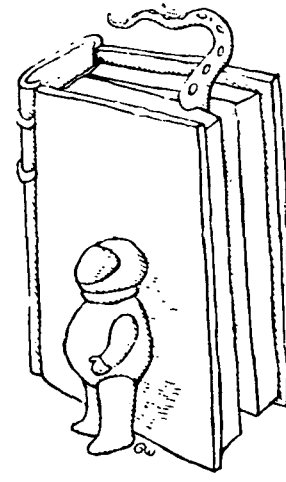
ALGIS BUDRYS

Books

Early del Rey, Lester del Rey, Doubleday, $7.95

Does Anyone Else Have Something Further to Add?, R. A. Lafferty, Scribner's, $6.95

Homeward and Beyond, Poul Anderson, Doubleday, $6.95



It's not hard to misconstrue pulp writers, especially if you spent your youth aspiring very much to be one of them. It is a while afterwards before one realizes there's an inexpungable difference between the child who ran away with the circus because it was the only bright free thing he had ever seen, and the later child who wishes to do so because he read about him.

There was, in other words, a time — fast fading — for which those of us from the 1950s and afterward are forever barred. We are not pulp writers, even those of us who wouldn't mind a bit. We are their heirs, even those of us who do.

St. Charles, Minnesota, is in the southern part of that state, about 20 miles west of the widest part of the upper Mississippi River. Highway 14 passes through it on its way to Winona, on the river. It was never a very grand road. Today it is two lanes of tarmacadam cut into the sides of clay hills that rise into appreciable cliffs on the Mississippi's west bank.

These days, St. Charles is in fact almost completely bypassed because of Interstate 90, which parallels 14 but picks up the traffic from Rochester, hurls it onto four lanes of good gray Eisenhower concrete, and whistles on across a splendid bridge above La Crosse,

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Wisconsin. From there, I-90 goes to Milwaukee, Chicago, and, with a brisk turn, into the postWar eastern turnpike system that obliterated the effect on America of the Allegheny barrier.

When Lester del Rey was a small, tough, orphaned, yapped-at child genius in the dusty fields of St. Charles, the hills to the east were barrier enough to most. But once you turn from the one sparse main street and climb the 20 miles to stand above the flood plain, you look down on one of the most soul-filling spectacles in Nature; that confluence of northern rivers, stretching for miles below the cliffs, where the Mississippi and its mingling upper tributaries form a shallow sea clad in green islands and bedecked by silver rapids, while the westerly wind sails puffball clouds toward a distant horizon almost near enough to touch.

For the boy who read under the covers by the light from a home made pencil-carbon arc, it's not that hard to see the next stop must be St. Louis, on that river which was then the only practicable mid-American highway to the world.

As for what precisely made him a pulp writer, when not even grinding poverty could have prevented him from becoming any one of a number of other prestigious things, there are hints in *Early del Rey*. Hints. The matured man has a tendency to soften the past for the knockaround boy.

Like similar Asimov volumes from Doubleday, this one contains a great deal of good fiction, and that must remain its primary *raison d'etre*. But between stories are del Rey's reminiscences of how these stories came to be written, and of his circumstances in dealing with John W. Campbell, Jr., and of the way in which a great pulp editor handled the short-fused Midwest kid in the days when 1938 was the opening year of "modern science fiction."

We have got to have many more books like this, soon, even if they are a little more polite than their authors' privately spoken reminiscences. Otherwise, in a rather short time everything we "know" about pulp SF will be secondhand inferences and adumbrations by earnest, painstaking, unempathetic, style-deaf, obtuse people. Doubleday, which is not that often to be commended, is to be commended, and urged to continue. This is particularly true because, in fact, this sort of format may be far preferable, even by historians, to some solid book of memoirs. And for just plain reading, of course, there is no comparison. The thing that makes Lester del Rey important, and the

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thing that makes pulp important, is the ineradicable ability of pulp to entertain.

You either like del Rey's particular short-worded, choppy style or you don't. He is sparing of punctuation and determinedly unelliptical. His prose is journalistic. And for someone with such a consistent ability to evoke reader emotion, to arouse poetic references, and to verge very near the breaking point of sentimentality, he writes a rather flat sentence. It is as if he built rose arbors out of 2 x 4s, spitting the nails into place. But arbors they are; even *Nerves*, which on first reading could never have been written by the author of, say, "Anything," finds time among the girders of its apparently stark suspense plot to weave little filigrees of poignance. (And "Anything," which appears early in *Early del Rey*, will tell you nearly as much about St. Charles as you could know by actually standing on the town's one commercial corner and studying who passes by and who leans against the enamelled metal storefronts lead-anchored over the crumbling 19th century brick).

Doubleday says that here are all the previously uncollected stories by del Rey, under every SF and fantasy byline he used, in chronological order between "The Faithful," (1938) and "Wind Between the Worlds" (1951). In fact, a very few of these stories appear in either the first, Prime Press, edition of *...And Some Were Human*, or the *From Unknown Worlds* anthology released by Street & Smith in 1948's attempt to test the market for newsstand fantasy. But the promise to the reader is subtantially kept. Here are essentially fresh Lester del Rey and Philip St. John and others at or very near their best, with science fiction and fantasy for gentle, contemplative reading. The interpolated reminiscences, though a little mellower than one used to hear them over games of six-set rummy in the cold water flat near the West Side docks, are totally, ruthlessly, sometimes needlessly self-critical of the technique or the level of conception in the stories.

There are 24 such stories in all — "The Stars Look Down," "Down Without Eagles," "Cross of Fire," "My Name is Legion," etc. — and often enough their very titles certainly seem enough to make the heart beat faster. Of all the stories here, however, the one that is worth $7.95 all by itself is "Though Dreamers Die."

I will not synopsize it for you. There was a time when SF promised its readers immortality. It said, more or less, that though children are consistently lied to by adults, though the world is neither

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rational nor benevolent — if one believes the world — though it may despise you for wishing to walk off beyond the eastern hills, and will attempt to use your own capacity for love as a weapon against you, nevertheless, someday you or someone like you would hear your voice say "I lived; I thought; I hoped; hear me — I have endured."

That is what "Though Dreamers Die" has to say, and it is worth $7.95. What, in fact, is it not worth?

It's a hard but opportunity-prone life. *Does Anyone Else Have Something Further to Add?*

Lafferty, an ugly, fascinating, magnetic man who frankly writes to fill time he would otherwise use for drinking, has created this collection in which half the stories are in one typeface, and are (loosely) about secret places, and the other eight are different and (he says) about mean men. Scribner's has packaged this up elegantly and so your five foot shelf of indispensables gains another inch.

It's not so much that all these stories are immortal, for they are not, by and large. One lurches, instead, from a fountain of words ("You would gag a gannet and make a buzzard belch," said the judge. "I'd crop your ears if that law still obtained.") to a freshet of ideas (the entire story, "Boomer Flats"), to sly deluges upon the reader's brain ("Nor Limestone Islands," in which one slowly realizes that Lafferty has taken a banal image and, what's more, taken it seriously).

How the man can laugh! No wonder we cannot provide a safe place for him; he was born to demonstrate that James Branch Cabell is not the whole answer.

No, it isn't that Lafferty's best stories are in here. There are no best Lafferty stories. There are one or two Lafferty stories that tail off a little, and some of them are in here. But mostly there are Lafferty stories, and they are in here. The title, again, is *Does Anyone Else Have Something Further to Add?*, and my response is: No, Sir.

Book not Being Reviewed Here: *The Shockwave Rider*, John Brunner. Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., $8.95.

The author, who has previously produced *Stand on Zanzibar* as well as a number of lesser works of varying quality, has convincingly stated that the publisher's editorial department mishandled his manuscript. Ordinarily, my sympathies, based on my own experiences on both sides of the fence, are with the editors.* But taking two characters

*When was the last time a writer admitted he habitually spells Catharine four different ways and depends on his publisher to catch it?

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and combining them into one is a difficult thing to alibi, and Harper & Row's Executive Editor has failed to do so effectively.

Let me explain to you what happened, and, further, what I think is the reason it happened.

Brunner wrote a novel containing, among other characters, two brothers, named Josh and Jake. They have different backgrounds, life styles, training and addresses. For some reason, the editors decided Brunner was really writing about the same man, but that from time to time he inadvertently got his first name wrong. So they changed it "back." The result is a single character who is either a chronic liar, a multiple personality, or a figure of mystery worthy of A.E van Vogt, but never part of anyone's story.

Now, it happens that writers make mechanical errors, and this one — hâd it been one — would not have been outrageously uncommon. Furthermore, a writer who gives similar first names to characters with the same last name is running several needless risks.

Nevertheless, Brunner is no novice, and his editors must have been aware of that fact. They made the dangerous assumption that an individual with professional credits from here to Timbuktu had *definitely* made a glaring error. Had there been the slightest doubt in their minds, they would have airlettered a query to England, where Brunner lives, or might even have made a phonecall. At $8.95 a copy for the finished product, of which the publisher can expect to gross half, they could afford it.

Their stated defense is that Brunner had prearranged not to see proofs, and therefore there was, regrettably, no correction for a sincere error made by three sets of editorial readers. But that is not only irrelevant to the specific point, it is no reply to a charge of marking down the writer for a dope. Worse, the situation comments tellingly on the care with which all those people read and understood the manuscript, and the criteria by which manuscripts are deemed acceptable for publication.

Harper & Row's Executive Editor, M. S. Wyeth, Jr., is taking the position that of course they're all sorry, but the book is a fine book anyway. Well, there are things you have to say when in charge of the Executive Editor territory. But would he have let it lie there in that manner if his department had created a book named *Jaw*, or had filled his warehouses with a novel by Earnest K. Gann called *Solo of Brother*, or brought him his advance galleys of *The Corsica Only Child*?

$8.95!

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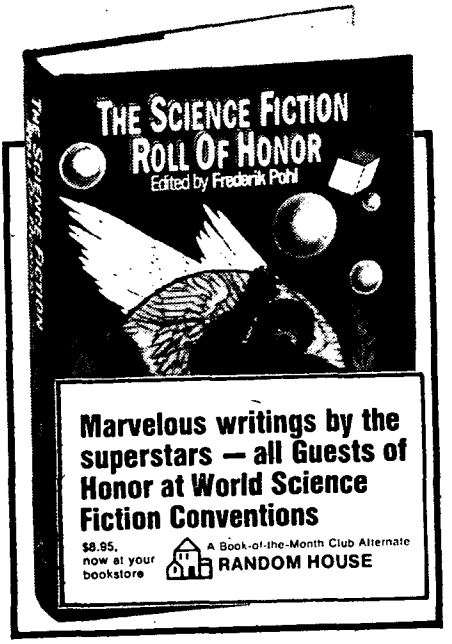
Poul Anderson is of that generation which does not write pulp but loves it, and whose work shows it. *Homeward and Beyond* is a collection of some of his short work, selected by himself, and introduced with approximate equivalents of the sort of thing found in *Early del Rey*. He talks of these pieces in a chattier way, and his apparent purpose is simply to bring the reader nine stories plus a little extra, but it makes an apt companion to the del Rey nevertheless.

It's not as if Anderson were only average productive; one short story collection would not irritate the eye of the body of his work. So it's noteworthy that, given this opportunity, he has taken care to include one short piece which is neither fantasy nor science fiction ("Wolfram") but excellent whimsy, and one long one ("The Peat Bog") which is one of the best historical adventure novelettes you are ever likely to read.

Of the seven other stories, "The Long Remembering," "Goat Song," and "The Visitor" have appeared in these pages over the years since 1958, and if you recall any one of them you recall an intricacy of language, a subtlety of development, a positive love of the spells that words can weave, and an astonishingly great grasp of words, so that the man is in fact a bard.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You recall also the pang with which each of these tales ends, so that even in "Goat Song," which is ostensibly a refiguring of Orpheus and Eurydice, a cruel Northland brooding sets a special sense of doom to get back the blood from the heart. "The Peat Bog" is like that, too. Set in the first century, and in Jutland, it is far enough away from our time and place to give the feeling certain kinds of SF give, but it is fiction of history, and another place in which Anderson uses some of the elements he incorporated in "Goat Song."

"Wolfram," now, is simply delightful. It is also the totally verisimilitudinous thumbnail bio-

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graphy of that Karl Georg Johann Friedrich Augustur Wolfram, Hofbibliotheker to the Margrave of Oberhaus-Blickstein, contemporary of Goethe, correspondent with Linnaeus, for whom tungsten has been named. To read it is to understand some little of the bounds of Anderson's interests and education, as one might glimpse them from some elevation.

Pretty good for a guy who pounds out potboilers for the coterie masses and furthermore takes pride in it; to find it immediately followed by a piece of work like "The Peat Bog" is to have that comment occur to one doubly strengthened.

Of the other four stories, three are from *Analog* — and again of another kind — and one is "Murphy's Hall," from the *Infinity Two* anthology. It is as if one were standing in front of the Anderson booth at the fair.

And that in fact is his purpose, and his reason for including two pieces which *might* — just might — be as satisfactory to SF or fantasy readers as any of his more readily categorizable work, but which also demonstrate his capability in terms that even non-fans must accede to.

I don't know precisely to whom he's speaking; for whom the display is arranged, what motives arise to do such a thing while a writer still sees many years ahead of him, and every hope of continuing to bear fruit. But I recommend it to you at any rate, and I think a copy ought to go to M. S. Wyeth, Jr., for the edification of his people. If this field can produce and support an Anderson, sir, it is time everyone dealt a little more carefully with everyone in this field.

INDEX RECEIVED

THE N. E. S. F. A. INDEX TO THE SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINES AND ORIGINAL ANTHOLOGIES 1974 - The New England Science Fiction Association (NESFA) has been doing a superb job of indexing the SF magazines since 1966, carrying on the Erwin S. Strauss index of 1951-1965. In 1971 they added original anthologies. This latest annual is now available for $4.00; most of the earlier indexes are still available. Your order or request for further information should be addressed to: New England Science Fiction Association, Box G, MIT Branch Post Office, Cambridge, Mass. 02139.

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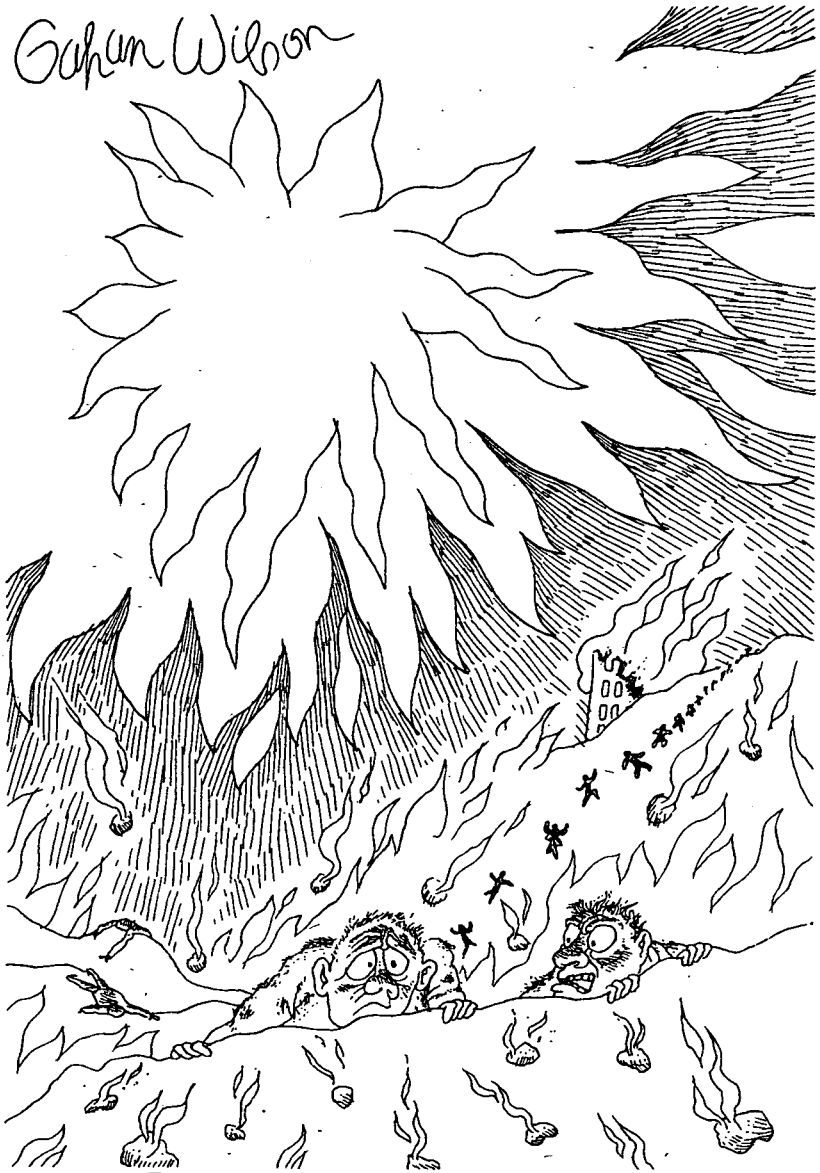

"First they guess wrong on Kohoutek, and now this!"

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In which the Black Widowers' monthly banquet falls on Friday the 13th and the members are presented with an historic puzzle involving unlucky numbers, the calendar and an assassination attempt on the President.

Friday The Thirteenth

by ISAAC ASIMOV

Mario Gonzalo unwound a long crimson scarf and hung it up beside his coat with an air of discontent.

"Friday the 13th," he said, "is a rotten day for the banquet, and I'm cold."

Emmanuel Rubin, who had arrived earlier at the monthly banquet of the Black Widowers and who had had a chance to warm up both externally and internally, said, "This isn't cold. When I was a kid in Minnesota I used to go out and milk cows when I was eight years old —"

"And by the time you got home the milk was frozen in the pail. I've heard you tell that one before," said Thomas Trumbull. "But what the devil, this was the only Friday we could use this month, considering that the *Milano* is closing down for two weeks next Wednesday, and —"

But Geoffrey Avalon, staring down austerely from his seventy-inches of height said in his deep voice, "Don't explain, Tom. If anyone is such a superstitious idiot as to think that Friday is unluckier than any other day of the week, or that thirteen is unluckier than any other number, and that the combination has some maleficent influence on us all — then I say leave him in the outer darkness and let him gnash his teeth." He was host for the banquet on this occasion and undoubtedly felt a proprietary interest in the day.

Gonzalo shook back his long hair and seemed to have grown more content now that most of a very dry martini was inside him. He said, "That stuff about Friday the 13th is common knowledge. If you're too ignorant to know that, Jeff, don't blame me."

Avalon bent his formidable eyebrows together and said, "To hear the ignorant speak of ignorance is always amusing.

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Come, Mario, if you'll pretend to be human for a moment, I'll introduce you to my guest. You're the only one he hasn't met yet."

Speaking to James Drake and Roger Halsted at the other end of the room was a slender gentleman with a large-bowled pipe, a weedy yellow mustache, thin hair that was almost colorless and faded blue eyes set deeply in his head. He wore a tweed jacket and a pair of trousers that seemed to have been comfortably free of the attentions of a pressing iron for some time.

"Evan," said Avalon, imperiously, "I want you to meet our resident artist, Mario Gonzalo. He will make a caricature of you, after a fashion, in the course of our meal. Mario, this is Dr. Evan Fletcher, an economist at the University of Pennsylvania. There, Evan, you've met us all."

And as though that were a signal, Henry, the perennial waiter at all the Black Widower banquets said, softly, "Gentlemen," and they seated themselves.

"Actually," said Rubin, attacking the stuffed cabbage with gusto, "This whole business about Friday the 13th is quite modern and undoubtedly arose over the matter of the Crucifixion. That took place on a Friday, and the Last Supper, which had taken place earlier was, of course, a case of thirteen at the table, the twelve Apostles and —"

Evan Fletcher was trying to stem the flow of words rather ineffectively, and Avalon said, loudly, "Hold on, Manny, I think Dr. Fletcher wishes to say something."

Fletcher said, with a rather apologetic smile. "I just wondered how the subject of Friday the 13th arose."

"Today is Friday the 13th," said Avalon.

"Yes, I know. When you invited me to the banquet for this evening, the fact that it was Friday the 13th was what made me rather eager to attend. I would have raised the point myself, and I am surprised that it came up independently."

"Nothing to be astonished about," said Avalon. "Mario raised the point. He's a triskaidekaphobe."

"A what?" said Gonzalo in an outraged voice.

"You have a morbid fear of the number thirteen."

"I do *not*," said Gonzalo. "I just believe in being cautious."

Trumbull helped himself to another roll and said, "What do you mean, Dr. Fletcher, in saying that you would have raised the point yourself? Are you a triskai-whatever, too?"

"No, no," said Fletcher, shaking his head gently, "but I have an interest in the subject. A personal interest."

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Halsted said, in his soft, somewhat hesitant voice, "Actually, there's a very good reason why thirteen should be considered unlucky, and it has nothing to do with the Last Supper. That explanation was just invented after the fact.

"Consider that early, unsophisticated people found the number twelve very handy because it could be divided evenly by two, three, four and six. If you sold objects by the dozen, you could sell half a dozen, a third, a fourth, or a sixth of a dozen. We still sell by the dozen and the gross today for that very reason. Now imagine some poor fellow counting his stock and finding he has thirteen items of something. You can't divide thirteen by anything. It just confuses his arithmetic and he says, 'Oh, damn, thirteen! What rotten luck!' — and there you are."

Rubin's sparse beard seemed to stiffen, and he said, "Oh, that's a lot of juck, Roger. That sort of reasoning should make thirteen a lucky number. Any tradesman would offer to throw in the thirteenth to sweeten the trade. — That's good steak, Henry."

"Baker's dozen," said James Drake, in his hoarse smoker's voice.

"The baker," said Avalon, "threw in a thirteenth loaf to make up a baker's dozen in order to avoid the harsh penalties meted out for short weight. By adding the thirteenth, he was sure to go over weight even if any of the normal twelve loaves were skimpy. He might consider the necessity to be unlucky."

"The customer might consider it lucky," muttered Rubin.

"As for Friday," said Halsted, "that is named for the goddess of love, Freia in the Norse myths. In the Romance languages the name of the day is derived from Venus, it is *vendredi* in French, for instance. I should think it would be considered a lucky day for that reason. Now you take Saturday, named for the dour old god, Saturn —"

Gonzalo had completed his caricature and passed it around the table to general approval and to a snicker from Fletcher himself. Gonzalo seized the opportunity to finish his potato puffs and said, "All you guys are trying to reason out something that lies beyond reason. The fact is that people *are* afraid of Friday and are afraid of thirteen and are especially afraid of the combination. The fear itself could make bad things happen. I might be so concerned that this place will catch fire, for instance, because it's Friday the 13th, that I won't be thinking and I'll stick my fork in my cheek."

"If that would shut you up, it

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might be a good idea," said Avalon.

"But I won't," said Gonzalo, "because I have my eye on my fork and I know that Henry will get us all out if the place catches on fire, even if it means staying behind himself and dying in agony. — Right, Henry?"

"I hope that the contingency will not arise, sir," said Henry, placing the dessert dishes dextrously before each diner. "Will you be having coffee, sir?" he asked Fletcher.

"May I have cocoa? Is that possible?" said Fletcher.

"Certainly it is," interposed Avalon. "Go, Henry, negotiate the matter with the chef."

And it was not long thereafter, with the coffee (or cocoa, in Fletcher's case) steaming welcomely before them, that Avalon tapped his water glass with his spoon and said, "Gentlemen, it is time to turn our attention to our guest. Tom, will you initiate the matter?"

Trumbull put down his coffee cup, scowled his face into a cross current of wrinkles and said, "Ordinarily, Dr. Fletcher, I would ask you to justify your existence, but having sat through an extraordinarily foolish discussion of superstition, I want to ask you whether you have anything to add to the matter. You implied early in the meal that you would have raised the matter of Friday the 13th yourself if it had not come up otherwise."

"Yes," said Fletcher, holding his large ceramic cup of cocoa within the parenthesis of his two hands, "but not as a matter of superstition. Rather, it is a serious historic puzzle that concerns me and that hinges on Friday the 13th. Jeff said that the Black Widowers were fond of puzzles, and this is the only one I have for you — with the warning, I'm afraid, that there is no solution."

"As you all know," said Avalon, with resignation, "I'm against turning the club into a puzzle-solving organization, but I seem to be a minority of one in this matter. So I try to go along with the consensus." He accepted the small brandy glass from Henry with a look compounded of virtue and martyrdom.

"May we have this puzzle?" said Halsted.

"Yes, of course. I thought for a moment, when Jeff invited me to attend your dinner, that it was to be held on Friday the 13th in my honor, but that was a flash of megalomania. I understand that you always hold your dinners on a Friday evening, and, of course, no one knows about my work but myself and my immediate family."

He paused to light his pipe, then leaning back and puffing gently, he said, "The story concerns

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Joseph Hennessy, who was executed in 1925 for an attempt on the life of President Coolidge.* He was tried on this charge, convicted, and hanged.

"To the end, Hennessy proclaimed his innocence and advanced a rather strong defense, with a number of people giving evidence for his absence from the scene. However, the emotional currents against him were strong. He was an outspoken labor leader, and a socialist, at a time when fear of socialism ran high. He was foreign-born, which didn't help. And those who gave evidence in his favor were also foreign-born socialists. The trial was a travesty, and once he was hanged and passions had had time to cool, many people realized this.

"After the execution, however, long after, a letter was produced in Hennessy's handwriting that seemed to make him a moving figure behind the assassination plot beyond a doubt. This was seized on by all those who had been anxious to see him hanged, and it was used to justify the verdict. Without the letter, the verdict must still be seen as a miscarriage of justice."

* *Joseph Hennessy never existed, and, as far as I know, there was never an assassination attempt on Calvin Coolidge. All other historical references in the story, not involving Hennessy, are accurate — I.A.*

Drake squinted from behind the curling smoke of his cigarette and said, "Was the letter a forgery?"

"No. Naturally, those who felt Hennessy was innocent thought it was at first. The closest study, however, seemed to show that it was indeed in his handwriting, and there were things about it that seemed to mark it his. He was a grandiosely superstitious man, and the note was dated Friday the 13th and nothing more."

"Why 'grandiosely' superstitious," asked Trumbull. "That's an odd adjective to use."

"He was a grandiose man," said Fletcher, "given to doing everything in a flamboyant manner. He researched his superstitions. In fact, the discussion at the table as to the significance of Friday and of thirteen reminded me of the sort of man he was. He probably would have known more about the matter than any of you."

"I should think," said Avalon, gravely, "that investigating superstitions would militate against his being victimized by them."

"Not necessarily," said Fletcher. "I have a good friend who drives a car frequently but won't take a plane because he's afraid of them. He has heard all the statistics that show that on a man-mile basis, airplane travel is safest and automobile travel most dangerous,

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and when I reminded him of that, he replied, 'There is nothing either in law or in psychology that commands me to be rational at every point.' And yet in most things he is the most rational man I know.

"As for Joe Hennessy, he was far from an entirely rational man, and none of his careful studies of superstition prevented him in the least from being victimized by them. And his fear of Friday the 13th was perhaps the strongest of all his superstitious fears."

Halsted said, "What did the note say? Do you remember?"

"I brought a copy," said Fletcher. "It's not the original, of course. The original is in the Secret Service files, but in these days of Xeroxing, that scarcely matters."

He took a slip of paper out of his wallet and passed it to Halsted, who sat on his right. It made the rounds of the table, and Avalon, who received it last, automatically passed it to Henry, who was standing at the sideboard. Henry read it with an impassive countenance and handed it back to Fletcher, who seemed slightly surprised at having the waiter take part, but said nothing.

The note, in a bold and easily legible handwriting read:

Friday the 13th

Dear Paddy,

It's a fool I am to be writing you this day when I should be in bed in a dark room by rights. I must tell you, though, the plans are now complete and I dare not wait a day to begin implementing them. The finger of God has touched that wicked man and we will surely finish the job next month. You know what you must do, and it must be done even at the cost of every drop of blood in our veins. I thank God's mercy for the forty-year miracle that will give us no Friday the 13th next month.

Joe.

Avalon said, "He doesn't really say anything."

Fletcher shook his head. "On the contrary, he says too much. If this were the prelude to an assassination attempt, would he have placed anything at all in writing? Or if he had, would the references not have been much more dark and Aesopic?"

"What did the prosecution say it meant?"

Fletcher put the note carefully into his wallet. "As I told you, the prosecution never saw it. The note was uncovered some ten years after the hanging, when Patrick Reilly, to whom the note was addressed, died and left it among his effects. Reilly was not implicated in the assassination attempt, though he would have been if the note had come to light soon enough.

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"Those who maintain that Hennessy was rightly executed, say that the note was written on Friday, June 13, 1924. The assassination attempt was carried through on Friday, July 11, 1924. It would have made Hennessy nervous to have made the attempt on any Friday, but for various reasons involving the Presidential schedule that was the only possible day for a considerable period of time, and Hennessy would be understandably grateful that it was not the 13th at least.

"The remark concerning the finger of God touching the wicked man is said to be a reference to the death of President Warren G. Harding, who died suddenly on August 2, 1923, less than a year before the assassination attempt was to 'finish the job' by getting rid of the Vice-President who had succeeded to the Presidency."

Drake, with his head cocked to one side, said, "It sounds like a reasonable interpretation. It seems to fit."

"No, it doesn't," said Fletcher. "The interpretation is accepted only because anything else would highlight a miscarriage of justice. But to me —" He paused and said, "Gentlemen, I will not pretend to be free of bias. My wife is Joseph Hennessy's granddaughter. But if the relationship exposes me to bias, it also gives me considerable personal information concerning Hennessy by way of my father-in-law, now dead.

"Hennessy had no strong feelings against either Harding or Coolidge. He was not for them, of course, for he was a fiery socialist, supporting Eugene Debs all the way — and that didn't help him at the trial, by the way. There was no way in which he could feel that the assassination of Coolidge would have accomplished anything at all. Nor would he have felt Harding to be a 'wicked man' since the evidence concerning the vast corruption that had taken place during his administration came to light only gradually, and the worst of it well after the note was written.

"In fact, if there were a President whom Hennessy hated furiously, it was Woodrow Wilson. Hennessy had been born in Ireland and had left the land a step ahead of English bayonets. He was furiously anti-British and therefore, in the course of World War I, was an emphatic pacifist, opposing American entry on the side of Great Britain. — That didn't help him at the trial, either."

Rubin interposed: "Debs opposed entry also, didn't he?"

"That's right," said Fletcher, "and in 1918 Debs was jailed for his opposition in consequence. Hennessy avoided prison, but he never referred to Wilson after

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American entry into war by any term other than 'that wicked man' He had voted for Wilson in 1916 as a result of the 'He-kept-us-out-of-war' campaign slogan, and he felt betrayed, you understand, when the United States went to war the next year."

"Then you think he's referring to Wilson in that note," said Trumbull.

"I'm sure of it. The reference to the finger of God touching the wicked man doesn't sound like death to me, but something less — just the touch of the finger, you see. As you probably all know, Wilson suffered a stroke on October 2, 1919, and was incapacitated for the remainder of his term. That was the finger of God, if you like."

Gonzalo said, "Are you saying Hennessy was going to finish the job by assassinating Wilson?"

"No, no, there was no assassination attempt on Wilson."

"Then what does he mean 'finish the job' and doing it 'even at the cost of every drop of blood in our veins.'?"

Avalon leaned back in his chair, twirled his empty brandy glass and said, "I don't blame you, Evan, for wanting to clear your grandfather-in-law, but you'll need something better than what you've given us. If you can find another Friday the 13th on which the letter could have been written, if you can figure out some way of pinpointing the date to something other than June 13, 1924 —"

"I realize that," said Fletcher, rather glumly. "and I've gone through his life. I've worked with his correspondence and with newspaper files and with my father-in-law's memory until I think I could put my finger on where he was and what he did virtually every day of his life. I tried to find events that could be related to some nearby Friday the 13th, and I even think I've found some — but how do I go about proving that any of them are *the* Friday the 13th? — If only he had been less obsessed by the fact of Friday the 13th and had dated the letter in the proper fashion."

"It wouldn't have saved his life," said Gonzalo, thoughtfully.

"The letter couldn't then have been used to besmirch his memory and give rise to the pretense that the trial was fair. — As it is, I don't even know that I've caught every Friday the 13th there might be. The calendar is so dreadfully irregular that there's no way of knowing when the date will spring out at you."

"Oh, no," said Halsted with a sudden soft explosiveness. "The calendar is irregular, but not as irregular as all that. You can find every Friday the 13th without trouble as far back or as far forward

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as you want to go."

"You can?" said Fletcher, with some astonishment.

"I don't believe that," said Gonzalo, almost simultaneously.

"It's very easy," said Halsted, drawing a ball-point pen out of his inner jacket pocket and opening a napkin on the table before him.

"Oh, oh," said Rubin, in mock terror. "Roger teaches math at a junior high school, Dr. Fletcher, and you had better be ready for some complicated equations."

"No equations at all necessary," said Halsted lofily. "I'll bring it down to your level, Manny. — Look, there are 365 days in a year, which comes out to 52 weeks and one day. If the year were 364 days long, it would be just 52 weeks long, and the calendar would repeat itself each year. If January 1 were on a Sunday one year, it would be on a Sunday the next year and every year.

"That extra day, however, means that each year the weekday on which a particular date falls is shoved ahead by one. If January 1 is on a Sunday one year, it will fall on Monday the next year, and on Tuesday the year after.

"The only complication is that every four years we have a leap year in which a February 29 is added, making 366 days in all. That comes to 52 weeks and *two* days so that a particular date is shoved ahead by two in the list of weekdays. It leaps over one, so to speak, to land on the second, which is why it is called leap year. That means that if January 1 falls on, say, a Wednesday in leap year, then the next year January 1 falls on a Friday, having leaped over the Thursday. And this goes for *any* day of the year and not just January 1.

"Of course, February 29 comes after two months of a year have passed so that dates in January and February make their leap the year after leap year, while the remaining months make their leap in leap year itself. In order to avoid that complication, let's pretend that the year begins on March 1 of the year before the calendar year ends on February 28 of the calendar year — or February 29 in leap year. In that way, we can arrange to have every date leap the weekday in the year after what we call leap year.

"Now let's imagine that the 13th of some month falls on a Friday — it doesn't matter which month — and that it happens to be a leap year. The date leaps and lands on Sunday the next year. That next year is a normal 365-day year, and so are the two following. So the 13th progresses to Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, but the year in which it is Wednesday is a leap year again, and the next year it falls on a Friday. In other words, if

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the 13th of some month is on a Friday of a leap year, by our definition, then it is on a Friday again five years later —"

Gonzalo said, "I'm not following you at all."

Halsted said, "Okay, then, let's make a table. We can list the years as L, 1, 2, 3, L, 1, 2, 3 and so on where L stands for leap year coming every four years. We can label the days of the week from A to G, A for Sunday, B for Monday through to G for Saturday. That will, at least, give us the pattern. Here it is —"

He scribbled furiously, then passed the napkin round. On it was written:

L 1 2 3 L 1 2 3 L 1 2 3 L 1 2 -
A C D E F A B C D F G A B D E -

3 L 1 2 3 L 1 2 3 L 1 2 3 L
F G B C D E G A B C E F G A

"You see," said Halsted, "on the 29th year after you start, A falls on leap year again, and the whole pattern starts over. That means that this year's calendar can be used again 28 years from now, and then again 28 years after that, and 28 years after that, and so on.

"Notice that each letter occurs four times in the 28-year cycle, which means that any date can fall on any day of the week with equal probability. That means that Friday the 13th must come every seven months on the average. Actually, it doesn't because the months are of different lengths, irregularly spaced, so that there can be any number of Friday the 13ths in any given year from 1 to 3. It is impossible to have a year with no Friday the 13ths at all and equally impossible to have more than three."

"Why is there a 28-year cycle?" asked Gonzalo.

Halsted said, "There are seven days in the week and a leap year every fourth year and 7 times 4 is 28."

"You mean that if there were a leap year every two years, the cycle would last 14 years?"

"That's right, and if it were every three years, it would last 21 years and so on. As long as there are seven days a week and a leap year every x years, with x and 7 mutually prime —"

Avalon interrupted: "Never mind that, Roger. You've got your pattern. How do you use it?"

"Say the 13th falls on a Friday in a leap year, where you remember to start the leap year on March 1 before the actual calendar leap year. Then you represent it by A, and you will see that the 13th of that same month will fall wherever the A shows up, five years later and six years after that, and then 11 years after that.

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"Now this is December 13, 1974, and by our convention of leap years this is the year before leap year. That means that it can be represented by the letter E, whose first appearance is under 3, the year before L. Well, then, by following the E's, we see that there will be another Friday the 13th in December 11 years from now, then in six more years, then in five years. That is, there will be a Friday the 13th in December, 1985, in December 1991, and in December, 1996.

"You can do that for any date for any month, using that little series I've just written out, and make up a perpetual calendar that runs for 28 years and then repeats itself over and over. You can run it forward or backward and catch every Friday the 13th as far as you like in either direction, or at least as far back as 1752. In fact, you can find such perpetual calendars in reference books like the *World Almanac*."

Gonzalo said, "Why 1752?"

"That's an unusual year, at least for Great Britain and what were then the American colonies. The old Julian calendar which had been used since Julius Caesar's time had gained on the season because there were a few too many leap years in it. The Gregorian calendar named for Pope Gregory XIII, was adopted in 1582 in much of Europe; and by that time the calendar was ten days out of sychronization with the seasons, so that ten days were dropped from the calendar; and every once in a while thereafter, a leap year was omitted to keep the same thing from happening again. Great Britain and the colonies didn't go along till 1752, by which time another day had been added, so they had to drop 11 days."

"That's right," said Rubin. "And for a while they used both calendars, referring to a particular date as O.S. or N.S., for Old Style and New Style. George Washington was born on February 11, 1732 O.S., but instead of keeping the date, as many people did, he switched to February 22, 1732 N.S. I've won considerable money by betting that George Washington wasn't born on Washington's Birthday."

Halsted said, "The reason Great Britain hesitated so long was that the new calendar was initiated by the papacy, and Great Britain, being Protestant, preferred going against the Sun than along with the pope. Russia didn't switch till 1923, and the Greek Orthodox Church is on the Julian calendar to this day, which is why the Orthodox Christmas comes on January 7 now, since the number of accumulated days difference is thirteen.

"Great Britain went from

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September 2, 1752, directly to September 14, dropping the days in between. There were riots against that, with people shouting, 'Give us back our 11 days.'"

Rubin said indignantly. "That wasn't as crazy as you might think. Landlords charged the full quarter's rent, without giving an 11-day rebate. I'd have rioted, too."

"In any case," said Halsted, "that's why the perpetual calendar only goes back to 1752. Those 11 missing days mess everything up, and you have to set up a different arrangement for days before September 14, 1752."

Fletcher, who had listened to everything with evident interest, said, "I must say I didn't know any of this, Mr. Halsted. I don't pretend that I followed you perfectly, or that I can duplicate what you've just done, but I didn't know that I could find a perpetual calendar in the *World Almanac*. It would have saved me a lot of trouble — but, of course, knowing where all the Firday the 13ths are wouldn't help me determine which Friday the 13th might be *the* Friday the 13th."

Henry interposed suddenly and said in his soft polite voice. "I'm not sure of that, Mr. Fletcher. May I ask you a few questions?"

Fletcher looked startled and, for a short moment, was silent.

Avalon said quickly, "Henry is a member of the club, Evan. I hope you don't mind —"

"Of course not," said Fletcher at once. "Ask away, Henry."

"Thank you, sir. — What I want to know is whether Mr. Hennessy knew of this pattern of date variations that Mr. Halsted has so kindly outlined for us."

Fletcher looked thoughtful. "I can't say for certain; I certainly haven't heard of it, if he did. — Still, it's very likely he would have. He prided himself, for instance, on being able to cast a horoscope, and for all the nonsense there is in astrology, casting a proper horoscope takes a bit of mathematics, I understand. Hennessy did not have much of a formal education, but he was fearfully intelligent, and he was interested in numbers. In fact, as I think of it, I am sure he couldn't possibly have been as interested in Friday the 13th as he was, without being impelled to work out the pattern."

"In that case, sir," said Henry, "if I ask you what Mr. Hennessy was doing on a certain day, could you call up someone to check your notes on the matter and tell us?"

Fletcher looked uncertain. "I'm not sure. My wife is home, but she wouldn't know where to look, and it's not likely I'll be able to give her adequate directions. — I could try, I suppose."

"In that case, do you suppose

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you could tell me what Mr. Hennessy was doing on Friday, March 12, 1920."

Fletcher's chair scraped backward, and for a long moment he stared open-mouthed. "What makes you ask that?"

"It seems logical, sir," said Henry, softly.

"But I *do* know what he was doing that day. It was one of the important days of his life. He swung the labor organization of which he was one of the leaders into supporting Debs for the Presidency. Debs ran that year on the Socialist ticket even though he was still in jail, and he polled over 900,000 votes — the best the Socialists were ever able to do in the United States."

Henry said, "Might not the labor organization have ordinarily supported the Democratic candidate for that year?"

"James M. Cox, yes. He was strongly supported by Wilson."

"So to swing the vote away from Wilson's candidate might be, in Mr. Hennessy's flamboyant style, the finishing of the job that the finger of God had begun."

"I'm sure he would think of that in that fashion."

"In which case, the letter would have been written on Friday, February 13, 1920."

"It's a possibility," said Fletcher, "but how can you prove it?"

"Dr. Fletcher," said Henry, "in Mr. Hennessy's note, he thanks God that there is no Friday the 13th the month after and even considers it a miracle. If he knew the perpetual calendar pattern, he certainly wouldn't think it a miracle. There are seven months that have 31 days and are therefore four weeks and three days long. If a particular date falls on a particular weekday in such a month, it falls on a weekday three past it the next month. In other words, if the 13th falls on a Friday in July, then it will fall on a Monday in August. Is that not so, Mr. Halsted?"

"You're perfectly right, Henry. And if the month has 30 days, it moves two weekdays along, so that if the 13th falls on a Friday in June, it falls on a Sunday in July," said Halsted.

"In that case, in any month that has 30 or 31 days, there cannot possibly be a Friday the 13th followed the next month by another Friday the 13th, and Mr. Hennessy would know that and not consider it a miracle at all.

"*But*, Mr. Fletcher," Henry went on, "there is one month that has only 28 days and that is February. It is exactly four weeks long, so that March begins on the same day of the week that February does and repeats the weekdays for every date, at least up to the 28th. If

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there is a Friday the 13th in February, there must be a Friday the 13th in March as well — *unless it is leap year.*

"In leap year, February has 29 days and is four weeks and one day long. That means that every day in March falls one weekday later. If the 13th falls on a Friday in February, it falls on a Saturday in March, so that though February has a Friday the 13th, March has a Friday the 12th.

"My new appointment book has calendars for both 1975 and 1976. The year 1976 is a leap year, and in it I can see that there is a Friday, February 13, and a Friday, March 12th. Mr. Halsted has pointed out that calendars repeat every 28 years. That means that the 1976 calendar would also hold for 1948 and for 1920.

"It is clear that once every 28 years there is a Friday the 13th in February that is not followed by one in March, and Mr. Hennessy, knowing that the meeting of his labor group was scheduled for the second Friday in March, something perhaps maneuvered by his opposition to keep him at home, was delighted and relieved at the fact that it was at least not a second Friday the 13th."

There was a silence all about the table, and then Avalon said, "That's very nicely argued. It convinces me."

But Fletcher shook his head. "Nicely argued, I admit, but I'm not sure —"

Henry said, "There is, possibly, more. I couldn't help wonder why Mr. Hennessy called it a 'forty-year miracle.'"

"Oh, well," said Fletcher, indulgently, "there's no mystery about that, I'm sure. Forty is one of those mystic numbers that crops up in the Bible all the time. You know, the Flood rained down upon the Earth for 40 days and 40 nights."

"Yes," said Rubin, eagerly, "and Moses remained 40 days on Mt. Sinai, and Elijah was fed 40 days by the ravens, and Jesus fasted 40 days in the wilderness, and so on. Talking about God's mercy would just naturally bring the number 40 to mind."

"Perhaps that is so," said Henry, "but I have a thought. Mr. Halsted, in talking about the conversion of the Julian to Gregorian calendar, said that the new Gregorian calendar omitted a leap year occasionally."

Halsted brought his fist down on the table. "Good God, I forgot. Manny, if you hadn't made that stupid joke about equations, I wouldn't have been so anxious to simplify and I wouldn't have forgotten. — The Julian calendar had one leap year every four years without fail, which would have been correct if the year were exactly

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365¼ days long, but it's a tiny bit shorter than that. To make up for that tiny falling-short, three leap years have to be omitted every four centuries, and by the Gregorian calendar those omissions come in any year ending in 00 that is *not* divisible by 400, even though such a year would be leap in the Julian calendar.

"That means," and he pounded his fist on the table again, "that 1900 was *not* a leap year. There was *no* leap year between 1896 and 1904. There were seven consecutive years of 365 days each, instead of three."

Henry said, "Doesn't that upset the perpetual calendar that you described?"

"Yes, it does. The perpetual calendar for the 1800s meets the one for the 1900s in the middle, so to speak."

"What was the last year before 1920 in which a Friday the 13th in February fell in a leap year?"

"I'll have to figure it out," said Halsted, his pen racing over a new napkin. "Ah, ah," he muttered, then threw his pen down on the table and said, "In 1880, by God."

"Forty years before 1920," said Henry, "so that on the day that Mr. Hennessy wrote his note an unlucky day in February was *not* followed by an unlucky day in March for the first time in forty years, and it was quite fair for him to call it, flamboyantly, a 'forty-year miracle.' It seems to me that February 13, 1920, is the only possible day in his entire lifetime on which that note could have been writtten."

"And so it does to me," said Halsted.

"And to me," said Fletcher. "I thank you, gentlemen. And especially you, Henry. If I can argue this out correctly now —"

"I'm sure," said Henry, "that Mr. Halsted will be glad to help out."

Coming Soon

MAN PLUS, a remarkable new novel by FREDERIK POHL

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Since we published Stuart Dybek's "The Palatski Man," (July 1971) he has had poetry, articles and fiction in several quarterlies as well as in *Commonweal and Orbit*. Mr. Dybek is currently teaching creative writing at Western Michigan University.

Horror Movie

by STUART DYBEK

He hadn't really been frightened until he went into the bathroom and saw the blood all over the toilet seat, streaks of it running down the bowl, filling in the cracks between the floorboards. He'd wanted to believe the old Puerto Rican lady from upstairs who told him not to worry, that it was just trouble some women have when they're pregnant. The old woman had been waiting for him when he got home late after school from exploring the new neighborhood. She told him the ambulance had just left with his mother. She said his mother had been worried about him, but the ambulance wouldn't let her stay. He was supposed to go inside and wait for Earl, but he could stay with her if he wanted. She kept lapsing into Spanish, and Calvin went inside to wait, trying not to worry.

But the blood was everywhere, dark clots of it, darker and stickier than blood should look, on the towels wadded in the sink, turning the water in the toilet bowl pink and clouded with what looked like either pieces of tissue or shreds of toilet paper. His first thought was that the old lady had lied, that his mother was dead, that Earl had killed her. Their constant arguing broke like a scab in his mind: how the whole reason they'd had to move was because the caseworker had caught Earl living with them and stopped their check. After that, his mother had told Earl to work or get out; and when she started flinging his stuff out the door, he'd grabbed her by the throat, knocking Calvin aside like a fly when he tried to defend her. She had told Calvin once they moved, no more Earl, but a few days later he was back living with them.

He went into his room and tried playing the basketball game he'd transplanted from their old apart-

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ment — shooting a rolled up sock through a looped clotheshanger — hooking and dribbling, the crowd cheering, the sock flying around the walls, the Big C working the ball down court, taking a pass from James in the corner, driving, jumping, pumping. But he couldn't get the hanger to stick right in the molding. Every time he took a shot, it fell, ending the game, leaving him back thinking about his mother and the blood in the bathroom. Finally, he lay down on his bed and squashed the pillow down on his head praying "Jesus help us" over and over till the feathers inside roared around his burning ears and he sprang up suffocating. He thought he'd heard Earl come in and got up to check, but there was nobody there, and so he walked out to the back porch.

Down in the alley the big guys were playing basketball. He watched them till the sun sunk past the garage roofs, making the broken bottles gleam like copper, thinking of guys he'd known in school who'd been taken out of their homes and sent to orphanages and foster homes, sometimes to live with white folks. The streetlights came on. Beyond the block of roofs and junkyards a moon the size of a basketball hung over the highrise housing project. When the game broke up, he went back inside.

He opened the refrigerator, its frosty lightbulb throwing a pale slab of light. He left the door open till he lit the gas burners on the stove. The people who'd moved had taken the fluorescent tubes from the overhead fixture. The blue light flickering off the walls like a police flasher made common noises seem too loud — the jelly jar striking the table, the tangled utensils rattling as he felt through the drawer for a butter knife, careful of the butcher knife blade that always made him nervous. He ate his sandwich standing by the sink, washing it down with a Nestle's Quik, letting the water jet from the tap churn the top to froth like a chocolate malt. He locked the back door, not latching the chain so, just in case Earl came, he wouldn't think he was trying to lock him out. Then he turned off the gas and walked down the long hallway with the bathroom at one end and his room off the middle, into the living room to watch TV. In the dark it looked like someone was sitting on the couch. He flicked on the lamp. A pair of Earl's trousers were flung over the cushions.

The late news was on — a special report on Viet Nam. Every so often, the picture would jump into blinking black and grey diagonals, and he'd have to get up to adjust the knobs and move the antenna around. He knew once the set got too warm he'd lose the

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picture for good, but he hoped it would play long enough for him to see part of his favorite show, Monsters Till Midnight. It came on every Friday, old horror movies, most of which were pretty funny, but Earl wouldn't let him watch it anymore, ever since his nightmares started and he'd wet the bed. Once after that, when his mother wasn't home, Earl came in drunk and started messing around, coming at him with his arms stretched out stiff, rollling his eyes, and working his hands like he was going to strangle him. Calvin had run into his room, and Earl had stood on the other side of the door yelling, "See what that Frankenstein shit done to your head! What you doing' in there? Pissing in your pants?"

He knew he shouldn't watch it now, but that seemed better than just sitting up doing nothing but waiting. The commercials were running, and he was feeling jittery, like sitting in the roller coaster before the ride really started, but already too late to get off. He turned the sound down and sat near the set so he could flick it off if Earl suddenly came in.

Lightning flashed over an old castle, and an organ played weird, shaky music. A team of wild-looking black horses clattered over wet cobblestones, dragging an empty black stage coach behind them. Their enormous eyes rolled, and they tossed at their bits, racing under dark trees, galloping through a graveyard, the coach careening off tombstones behind them. Ha HaHaHaHaHa mad laughter streamed through the night. Calvin heard something at the door and jumped up, punching the off button.

He stood there, the silver dot in the middle of the screen seeming to take forever to fade, waiting for Earl to come in, but he didn't. Calvin went to the door and stood listening. It was quiet, but every time he decided he'd been mistaken, he heard a creak like someone shifting their weight on the other side of the door as if they were listening to him too. He sunk slowly to his haunches and tried to peer through the keyhole, but it was stuffed with fuzz. He put his ear to it, listening hard for breathing, but couldn't be sure. Finally he crawled away from the door, trying not to make a sound. He was sweating and knew he didn't want to watch the show anymore, but he turned the set back on. It flashed into a rolling series of lines; he turned up the sound. Then he forced himself to walk loudly, humming, past the door, stop and ask in his deepest voice, "Who's there?"

No one answered.

"Ain't nobody at the door, Daddy," he yelled back into the living room.

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He turned the set back off, removed his shoes, and snuck past the front door into his bedroom. He undressed in the dark and covered himself up, although he was warm. Beneath the covers he brought his knees up and reached under his pillow for his wooden cross. He'd kept it there ever since the night last spring that he and his best friend, James, had gone to the Adelphi and seen a vampire movie. What had frightened him most were the rats swarming across the screen through the sewers, their countless eyes piercing red, squealing and scrambling over each other's bodies like a current of slimy fur and leathery tails, rushing from the pipes out into the streets, swarming through the windows, twitching snouts and yellow buck teeth filling the screen, almost bursting through the screen itself, like circus animals through a paper hoop. They were the vampire's rats overrunning the village, and only a cross had turned them back. He and James agreed it was the best movie they'd ever seen, but later that night he'd sensed the rats crawling about his room, waiting for their forces to gather before pouncing on his bed. And he knew they were real, having seen them often enough before, and remembering the stench of death that had driven them out of their apartment the summer one died inside the refrigerator motor, or his mother screaming in the middle of the night when one came out of the bathroom and the next day putting out little bottle caps of poison all over the house and telling him he'd die if he touched them. Or the time the lady downstair's baby had his lower lip chewed away, and later there had been a march through the streets with everyone angry and singing at the same time, and the leaders had carried huge rats nailed to sticks above their heads like flags.

All that was in the old neighborhood before he'd had the cross. Getting the cross had been James' idea. They'd copped it from a religious goods store downtown. He lay there thinking about James and himself walking the streets after school, sneaking under the turnstiles and riding the el downtown to see a movie or if they didn't have the money just running through the crowded stores.

Then he was dreaming, and in his dream he and James were racing up the down escalators, going higher and higher past chandeliers, overlooking each different floor, merchandise spread out as far as the eye could see. The people riding down were all giving them dirty looks, the white people coldly looking away and the black people frowning hard, but the higher they got, the less people.

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Then they were so high there weren't any more things to buy, just offices with frosted glass doors and the sound of typewriters, and still up even higher with the escalator changing from smooth gliding steel to one with old rubber steps and black beltlike handrails that jerked along. James had managed to stay in front of him no matter how hard he tried to catch up, and every so often he'd turn back and grin down at him.

They reached the top where the escalator folded into a bare wooden floor. He stood in a huge dim room, dusty light gleaming through dirty windows, and barely visible through the windows the smoky tips of skyscrapers. It was some kind of storeroom full of crates and rolls of material.

"Hey, James, where are you, bruth?" He called. But James didn't answer. He walked down an aisle of boxes, half-blinded by the sun against the window at the end.

"Hey, James!' he called again. He heard something move down the next aisle and suddenly remembered that the store detective had been chasing them up the escalators and he was giving himself away by shouting. At the same instant, his heart started pounding so hard he was paralyzed like a man having a heart attack. He heard a whistle and looked up. James was standing at the edge of a stack of boxes that towered up among the cobwebbed rafters. He was grinning.

"Hey, Cal," he started to say, and then the detective rose up behind him holding an ax with both hands over his head and bringing it down with a cracking noise through James' skull, pitching him headlong off the boxes, tumbling down and stiking the floor, all bouncing arms and legs beating up dust.

He ran over to him crying "James! James!' James lay twisted on his face. One of his legs had come off, and there was a jagged hole in the back of his head showing the hollowness inside. And then Calvin realized he was looking at a mannequin — one of those chocolate-looking ones that are supposed to be Negro. Besides, it couldn't be James, it was wearing a dress. He twisted its head around, and its wooden eyelids clunked back open like a doll's, looking up at him with his mother's eyes from his mother's face. He heard a laughing scream and saw the detective, framed against the blurry blazing window, running up the aisle towards him, ax poised above his head, and felt his heart pound loose in his chest as he tried to rise.

He woke drenched with sweat, someone shaking his bed, until he realized it was his heart pounding so hard it felt like it was shaking the room. He lay forcing his face into the mattress, clenching his

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teeth until his jaw ached, trying to regain control. He needed to breath, to suck in lungfuls of air, but was afraid of moving in the dark. He knew he had to pretend to sleep. If someone was in the room with him, standing over his bed, then his only chance was stillness. If he didn't move, didn't acknowledge their presence by showing his fear, he might be overlooked.

He pretended to sleep a long time, listening to the silence, analyzing the steady stream of creaks and rustlings. His body seemed glued to the mattress by his sweat, and he began to itch all over.

His left arm had gone totally numb. He slid his right arm under the pillow feeling for the cross. It was gone. He started to panic, sure someone had taken it away, then he touched it stuck between the mattress and wall. Holding it to his throat, he tried inching off the sweaty area, the sheets unpasting from his back. He reached down and snapped the sweaty elastic band on his shorts, which had been eating into his waist. The air in the room felt suddenly cool, and a chill swept over him. He became conscious of having to urinate. His crotch felt so wet that he wasn't sure whether he'd pissed in his bed already or not.

He remembered the times he'd waited like this before, praying for the light, not daring to step out of bed for fear of rats. He'd always made it through to the morning, but his mother had always been in the next room, too. He thought of sneaking upstairs and begging the old lady to take him in, but he knew that was a fantasy less real than his fears, that as soon as he moved through the doorway, the detective would be waiting at the end of the hall, stalking from the bloodstained bathroom, wild-eyed, a madman's grin on his face as he raised the ax. His muscles clenched till they cramped, the tip of his penis aching, the ache spreading inside his body until the pain began to rival the fear, a part of the fear itself. He heard the back door rattle, then creaking like someone in the kitchen, the sound so clear he wondered if it wasn't Earl in late, feeling his way drunk. But the thought of Earl sneaking around the house didn't ease the fear. Maybe it had been Earl behind the door all the time. Maybe this was his way of getting rid of him. He could feel his hate and anger trying to well up through the fear, smothered by it each time, cursing the motherfucker oh motherfucker dirty mother you mother momma oh momma. Hearing the sounds, one following the other now down the hallway, till he glimpsed a shape darker than the darkness of the doorway, sweat beading out on his forehead, the surge of urine

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scalding down his legs, tears burning from the corners of his clenched eyes.

When he woke again, it was Saturday noon. He slipped on his clothes and stripped off the bedsheet, stuffing it under the bed. The new urine stain darkened the yellowed edges of previous stains on the mattress.

He was so hungry he had a stomach ache, and he paced the flat opening drawers and looking through cabinets. He picked through Earl's crushed trousers finding a couple crumpled dollar bills. He put his sunglasses on and went out the back door, leaving it unlocked behind him, the fall sun glinting off the worn back porches.

Calvin ran down the alley and up Division, change jingling in his pockets, trying to get as far away as he could. His breath came so easily that it felt as if he'd never tire, moving at a pace slightly faster than the crowd's, the reflection of his body running wavery beside him along store windows, under the record shop loudspeakers, past bakeries and blasting restaurant ventilators. He couldn't slow down, afraid he'd lose the feeling of excitement he felt out on the streets. He tried to figure out how to use the feeling. If he knew what hospital his mother was at, he could go there, call her on the phone. Then he thought of trying to get back to the South Side and find James. That's what the feeling now was most like — feeling free on Saturdays, he and James going somewhere, maybe the Adelphi, sitting up in the balcony zinging flattened popcorn boxes through the projection beam, their shadows scalling across the screen and everybody in the theater shouting and laughing.

He jogged the streets for a long time, finally jaywalking through traffic to where a group of people crowded around a carry-out stand. Some of them were Puerto Ricans like the kids at his new school, talking rapidly in Spanish. He could hear the grease popping and his stomach turned over. He ordered a Polish sausage with everything on it and a chocolate malt. He ate half of it walking down the streets, walking till he found a doorway in a boarded-up store where he could relax. Pigeons landed, and he tossed them pieces of bun till he had them eating out of his hand. Then it started to get chilly, and little whirlpools of dust blew out at him from the corners of the doorway, and so he left.

He kept checking the street signs and fronts of buses for names he recognized and watching for buildings that looked like hospitals. The farther he walked the more his earlier feeling of freedom dissolved

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into an aimlessness that bordered on panic. Even though it was still daylight, neon lights were blinking on in the fronts of stores. The sidewalks were already in shadow. He became more and more aware of losing his invisibility as the crowds thinned, and he tried not to look at cops, but kept meeting their eyes. At an intersection he noticed a movie marquee flickering little yellow bulbs and wandered over to check out the advertisements.

Half the bulbs were burned out, and so many letters were missing on the marquee that he couldn't tell what was playing. There were no pictures in the glass cases; the cases themselves were dirt-fogged and pocked with BB holes. But taped to the door was a torn black poster announcing in dripping red letters:

VOODOO VAMPIRE
If you frighten easily
DO NOT enter this theater!

He pushed one of his crumpled dollars through a slot in the glass booth, and a faded violet ticket cranked out. An old junkie of an usher, one eye clouded pearl-blue with a cataract, nodded towards him as he tore the ticket in two. Calvin walked quickly across the empty tile floor, through peeling arches and cracked pillars plastered with old posters of movies he'd never heard of, to a dim corner where an old woman sat behind a huge pile of popcorn heaped over a bare lightbulb. He bought a box of popcorn and a box of Red Hots, then headed up the balcony stairs. They spiraled past maroon-tiled landings where he watched himself sullenly climbing, wondering how much higher he had to go. The silence of the theater made him uneasy — outside, he'd imagined sitting among screaming gangs of kids like at the Adelphi. Finally he reached the top and entered through a dirty velvet curtain.

He stopped immediately and waited for his eyes to readjust. There was a bluish beam slanting directly overhead from the projectionist's slot and the sound of running film, but nothing on screen. He couldn't even see the screen, as if a dense wall of blackness was what was being projected. Then he heard the far-off booming of surf and gulls trading calls.

Two disks flaring gold were emerging on screen. Calvin made his way down the steps in the reflected glow, feeling along the backs of seats till his hand touched a face.

"Sorry," he mumbled, veering to the other side of the aisle and stumbling into a lumpy stuffed seat amidst an explosion of bird caws. At the same moment he became aware that the lights on screen were actually the eyes of a black man watching the dawn.

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Dawn broke all around the man now, his silhouette against pale golds and pinks, rocking in the bow of a longboat. He was chained like the others, all rowing in unison, while the whites sat in the stern, their muskets held ready. "Raz," one of the other Africans called to him, and he looked away from the horizon where a square-rigger rode, towards where the man pointed to a green island jutting up from the sunrise stained water.

The popcorn tasted like it was a hundred years old, so stale it squeeked when he chewed it. Calvin sat there sucking the husks from his teeth watching the movie: Raz and the rest of them marched through the jungle, put to work in the cane fields. He felt relieved and disappointed at the same time — the movie wasn't really frightening. About the only halfway scary thing was the Castle which rose above everything, its dark stone draped in Spanish moss, and the women who peered out from its shadowy balconies, elegant black women in hooped billowing gowns, faces hidden by fans, holding their plumed floppy hats against the wind.

He let the popcorn box slide to the floor, then kicked it over, grinding the kernels under his feet. The floor seemed to attach itself to the soles of his gym shoes, slippery and sticky at the same time, as if the years had accumulated in layers of masticated caramel and decomposed Holloway bars. He sat unconsciously feeling stuck as he watched one of the slaves mired in quicksand. The man had been trying to escape through the swamps at night. He'd managed to grab onto a vine and had almost pulled himself free when the arms began shooting up through the slime all around him. Then came their heads — eyes without eyeballs, grey rotted flesh, tattered rags dripping and steaming in a ring of foxfire. The slave was screaming. Calvin could feel himself wanting to shout back like he would have, like everybody would have by now, at the Adelphi, but the theater remained silent. Only the screams and gurgling as the man was sucked under, the film clicking through the sprockets, and a low throbbing like an enormous heart which Calvin suddenly realized had been going on for some time, growing steadily louder, coming from the Castle.

He opened the box of Red Hots. His legs felt cold and he drew them up under him on the seat. The throbbing speeded up, grew louder. Calvin could feel it in his teeth. He bunched himself up with tension, peering into the midnight of the screen, trying to brace himself for whatever was coming.

The women ran shrieking down

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the grassy slopes between the Castle and the slave shacks, their nightgowns streaming, eyes mad, lips curled back into fang-baring smiles.

Calvin could almost feel their breaths. They were horrible, and yet he was unable to look away. He kept telling himself it would be over soon and he would watch just a little more, despite the part of him which knew already that watching this movie was a terrible mistake and urged him to tear himself from his seat and leave the theater now. He juxtaposed an inner image of himself against the huge images of the screen: he lay stiffened with fear in his bed while the women made their way down the hallway to his room.

Then it was over: Raz picking his way from shack to shack over the bodies of the men he'd landed with. They lay face up, smeared with blood, eye sockets empty, skin grey as if it had been drained of color as well as blood.

Calvin filled his mouth with Red Hots, wondering if the peppery candies could warm him up. The theater kept getting colder, as if someone had turned the airconditioner on full blast. A wind seemed to be swirling under the seats. He hunched down further, tucking his arms between his knees and chest, watching the movie while half remembering a Greyhound ride to Memphis, not even sure it ever happened, shivering awake with the bus lights dim and the motor humming and his mother, everybody but him, asleep.

"Ohhh God, ooohh God," a voice was saying, then it gurgled off into a spasm of retching. At first Calvin tried to fit it in the film, the choking in between Raz's panting, but it seemed to come from directly behind him. Heaves like someone's insides were coming apart, so violent he was afraid to turn around. The Red Hots were gone and he started chewing the cardboard flaps of the box.

Raz had entered the Castle. Scarlet draperies were flailing in a scarlet room. He moved past chandeliers and tapestries of wolves leaping at the throats of stags, through rooms lined with armor and weapons, across marble floors inlaid with strange symbols. A piano was playing a disjointed melody, and he followed the sound till he came to the room where it stood, silent, no one at the keys.

An iron door swung slowly open. The women stood on the other side smiling. They filed out towards him, hands reaching out like claws in hideous supplication. He backed away, then suddenly whirled, seizing a sword from the wall and slashing it wildly before him, breaking through their circle, till he was through the door and

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pulling it shut against them.

He ran down a stone tunnel lined with greasy torches, up broken stone stairs scattering rats, splashing through black puddles. The stairs spiraled higher and higher, curving back outside along the seaward wall of the Castle, the waves smashing in far below, the wind howling through eaves. A skull-like moon sailed through smoking clouds. The stairs tapered into mere footholds, until at last he scaled the side of the highest turret, boosting himself in through a narrow window.

The moonlight streamed like a projectionist's beam through the window behind him. He stood silvered in the center of a low, tilted chamber peering into the shadows. It looked empty, only the wind whistling in over edges of stone. Then mixed with the wind another sound like the hissing of a snake. In the farthest corner the vampire was unfolding from his black cape. He hung from the ceiling like an enormous insect, his skin so white it was luminous, pulsing from within with the whiteness of maggots. His eyes were ringed in hollows of red, and a gaping hole of a mouth curled back revealing long yellow fangs and a scaly grey tongue that flicked as he hissed. He began to circle the walls, eyes liquid red like an albino rat's, grinning at Raz's paralysis. When he reached the window, he crouched as if about to take flight, his body blotting out the moonlight. Then with a shriek he whirled and sprang at Raz, the sword arching to meet him, both connected for a moment, and then his hands unclasping from Raz's throat, his torso collapsing into a deflated heap of silks and ashes, while his head topples backwards, rolling across the tilted floor.

It seemed to Calvin to roll out of the screen, to hang in midair even with the balcony, eyes still living, teeth gnashing and gurgling up blood, huge ruby clots of it foaming down the jaws, flames starting to lick out of nostrils and sockets, screaming over and over in a voice that shook the theater: KILL ME! KILL ME!

Calvin held to the sides of his seat as he felt it begin to whirl. For a moment the entire seat seemed to pitch backwards like a dentist's chair. He'd flinched with his entire body as the head appeared to roll into space. He struggled like a dreamer half-awakened from a nightmare of falling to regain his equilibrium and breath. The ear-splitting screaming made him weak and nauseous. He couldn't understand how it could continue and continue like a broken record: KILL ME! KILL ME! Where was the audience? Had the projectionist gone mad?

Unable to stand anymore,

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unable to move, Calvin ducked his head and clapped his hands over his ears. He entered the world of the smell of the theater floor, the spearmint wrappers, the rancid popcorn oil, old urine, stale sweet wine. Above him it went on like it would never end.

He felt a bony hand lock on the back of his neck.

"Hey, boy," the old usher said, his gums showing as he chuckled, "it's just a movie."

Calvin opened his eyes. The house lights were on, naked lightbulbs dim among cobwebs, shining down from the filthy ornate dome of the empty theater. He looked around at the curving rows of dilapidated seats, their backs waded with hardened gum. The screen hung down below, dirty white, looking small and flabby like a piss-stained sheet. He pushed himself up and limped down the aisle. His foot had fallen asleep. The usher was still grinning and grinding his toothless jaws, rolling over popcorn with a carpet sweeper. Down the last row, a ragged figure slouched forward over the backs of the seats, a strand of bilish vomit dripping from his mouth.

"A winehead," the usher's voice said from down below, tiny and unamplified in the empty expanses, "they come in here all the time to die."

Calvin turned to stare at him.

"Say, my man," the usher said, his cataract twinkling, "you ever had a gum job?"

"Huh?" Calvin said.

"A gum job, heh-heh!" He demonstrated, retracting his lips till his purple gums showed in a grin, munching softly together. "Dig? You old enough to get it hard?" He set his sweeper aside and trudged up the stairs towards Calvin.

Calvin forced himself to walk until he reached the curtain, but as soon as he slipped through, he was bounding down the stairs. He hurried through the lobby instinctively braced for the bright sunlight after the darkness of the theater. Night came as a shock, bringing the images he'd just seen back in a rush. All he could think of doing was getting away from the theater.

He jogged down the sidewalks past grated shop windows and padlocked doors, keeping to the best lit streets, conserving his strength for sprints across dark allies and doorways. The streetlights bounced above him as he ran, turning from time to time to check behind him, but the streets were empty except for a single figure blocks away.

He kept going till he came to a long viaduct. A train was dinging, hissing out steam on the tracks above. Most of the bulbs in the

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tunnel were out, and he stared through the darkness of crisscrossing girders unable to see the other side.

The walls inside were cracked, the sidewalks strewn with hunks of concrete and broken bottles. He felt the presence of sewer rats sneaking through the gutters, of the eyeless men moving towards him in stiff-legged strides. The train coupled overhead with a screech of metal wheels. Calvin spun and raced out back along the street. But the figure he'd seen blocks away was closer now, approaching hunched under the streetlights.

He dashed down a dark side street where the streetlights seemed spaced farther apart, glowing down through a tangle of swaying branches. He ran a block and turned — nothing. But now he couldn't stop running. He had given the sign — his panic was an open admission of their existence. The movie informed the street like an afterimage. He could feel the women clutch after him from doorways as he rushed by.

He hurdled an alley. A car, with only its orange parking lights burning, glided out after him, its spotlight sweeping the walls and trees along his path.

"Stop right there!" a white cop hollered out the squad car window. Calvin cut down a gangway between two buildings, across a backyard, the enraged dog in the next yard barking at him along the fence. He flipped a low gate and took off down the alley zigzagging as he ran, tensed for the gunshot, wondering if he could throw himself down before the slug tore into his back, an image of a kid his age sprawled in a puddle of blood on a magazine cover and the caption KILLED BY PIGS at the center of his mind. He made it to the intersection of the alley and a dark street lined with junkyards. He trotted low behind parked cars, avoiding the next street which was well-lit, knowing now he had to keep to the side streets, with the cops looking for him. He was thinking again of the places they sent you — Audy Home, Good Counsel Orphanage, St. Charles Reform School.

He crossed over between parked cars at the next street, unable to run anymore, his side bursting and his heart swollen so huge he was barely able to suck his breath past it. A bar's neon sign burned in the middle of the block. Music floated out down the street. Staring between parked cars through the open door, he could see people lined up drinking and shouting and a woman dancing on the bar in her underwear. A drunk groaned, passed-out in a doorway. At the mouth of the next alley a man was bracing himself against a wall,

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pissing and laughing at two other men. The had an enormous fat Puerto Rican woman tied to a phone pole with a shirt. Her face was smeared red with rouge and lipstick, and she had a bloody nose. Their eyes met.

"Help," she said in English. She didn't yell, she hardly said it, just kind of formed the word with her lips, looking straight at him with terrified made-up eyes. One of the men kicked her when she said it. It wasn't a violent kick — he brought his foot up like a punter into her breast, which flopped up and hit her in the chin.

"Ooowww," she said, like he had hurt her feelings.

"What you looking at, man?" the guy pissing said to Calvin.

Calvin kept on going. He knew none of them were afraid he'd try to help her, that even she didn't really expect it, that they all knew you couldn't help anyone unless you were big enough to hurt someone. He was going to try to walk all night. He couldn't run anymore. He was shivering. The windshields of cars were fogged with vapor, their hoods wet, as if it had rained. The streetlights had halos; mist hung over a block of rubbled lots and half-wrecked houses.

He looked back and caught a glimpse of a figure several blocks away jumping into a doorway. Maybe the guy who was pissing decided to follow him just in case, he thought. He started walking fast, listening for footsteps behind him. He turned around again. This time he was sure he'd seen the same figure leap out of sight behind a tree. He was feeling sick. His mouth tasted sour and he spit, fighting to keep from vomiting. He turned the next corner, stopped and peeked around the building. He was coming! The same hunched figure he'd seen earlier that night, running towards him now, in and out of the shadows of trees. It was hard for him to start running again. His legs had gone stiff. "Help me, help me," his mind kept repeating with each breath.

He turned corners, dodged between parked cars, raced down the middle of empty streets, praying to see headlights, even the cops. At the end of a street, a wall of high-rise housing projects reared up lit in yellow. When he saw it he knew where he was and caught his second wind.

The street dead-ended, and he ran through canyons of buildings, his gymshoes slapping in an echo chamber of walls. Yellow bulbs smoldered above green doors, everything looking locked, as if the world was hiding for the night. He could hear the wind knocking the wires against the flagpole. He leaped a row of hedges, turning his head in midair as if suspended and

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glimpsing the figure still running behind him across the expanses of concrete, overcoat billowing, hair shining silver. Then he hit the other side, staggering to regain his balance, back in stride past swings and monkeybars, highfliers, teeter-totters, the playground flood lights projecting his giant fleeting shadow across a screen of concrete walls.

He could hear his own breathing, feel the figure gaining on him, pounding behind across the asphalt. They were nearing the high cyclone fence that separated the playground from the street. All his efforts had been directed towards it since he'd seen the project. He knew where the mesh had been bent up at the bottom just wide enough for him to roll under, but he didn't recognize the spot in the dark till he was right on it. He hit the ground, arms dragging the rest of his body clear, shirt hooked a fraction of a second till his momentum tore it loose, scrambling back up to run, his scraped knees on fire, then numb. Behind him he heard a body hit the fence so hard that it rang up and down the block. He glanced back and saw the figure spread-eagled against the mesh, clawing his way to the three strands of barbed wire at the top.

Calvin fled across the street, down the alley. He remembered leaving the back door open, but realized it might be locked if someone had come home. He raced up the back stairs and pushed against the door, the doorknob turning, and he was alone in the dark kitchen.

His hands were trembling so bad he could hardly lock it. He slid down the door and lay deafened by his own breathing and blood pounding through his head, trying to hear past it for footsteps climbing the back stairs. He fought to regain control, afraid his heaving would carry out into the alley. Slowly he became aware of his body again: instead of a single throbbing pain it divided itself into many, his head, his chest and side, his shaking legs, knees. He touched his knees through the tears in his jeans. Part of the material felt ground into the skin, his kneecaps felt sticky, and his own touch like a sting. He still hadn't heard any footsteps.

He sat on the floor in the kitchen wondering what to do next, thinking of sneaking down the hallway to his bedroom, climbing into bed deep under the covers with the cross against his throat. But the thought continued beyond his stopping it like a runaway reel of film, images of himself cringing in the dark, waiting night after night for the undead pacing the flat, the hideous ladies gliding down the hall, white arms reaching through his doorway for his throat, his body writhing, face pushed into the

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stench of the mattress.

His legs kicked out on their own, knocking over a chair. At the instant it hit, he thought he heard someone exclaim in the front of the apartment. He held very still — there had been a click like the opening of a door. He became aware of a draft along the floor as if the front door was open. And then he realized that while he lay here gasping and listening at the back stairs, they could have fooled him, could have come stalking up the front way through the silent hallways, listening at doors for him, peering through the cracks.

He got to his feet and felt his way along the stove to the drawer where the silverware was kept. He opened the drawer and felt along the utensils, trailing his fingers over can openers, ladles, the potato masher, until they located the heavy blade.

He picked out the butcher knife and felt it balance in his hand, tested the razor-sharp thinness of the edge growing into the heavy thickness of the blade. His fingers fit perfectly along the wooden handle. It had taken him so long to pick it up, and now he knew that he had always been right — to grasp it would be the final admission that everything was real. For a fraction of a moment he thought — suppose it was his mother back from the hospital moving down the hallway in her nightgown, or Earl, finally returned, but he knew it wasn't either. It was as if they never existed.

He swung it gently in front of him feeling the air swish by, slightly resisting the blade and turning it in his hand, feeling the strength its heavy momentum imparted to his arm as he swung it again cleaving before him, stepping into the long hallway with the bathroom at his back, with every footstep cocking his arm and pumping, cocking and plunging, possessed with a new freedom and a new terror as he hacked through the dark.

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AN EDGAR RICE PUDDING

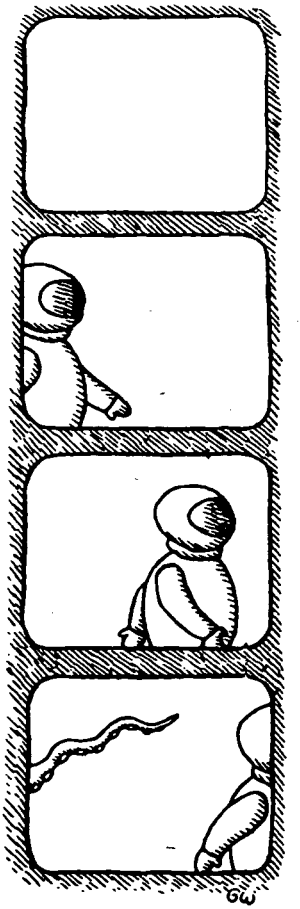
I ended last month's column with an apology for not reviewing *The Land That Time Forgot* because it had not appeared within striking distance of me. Three days after I mailed the piece to my editor, TLTTF opened with no fanfare right around the corner.

I was concerned with this film for two reasons, both literary. As the proprietor of a science fiction emporium, I can say with certainty that two of the continually best selling authors in the field are Edgar Rice Burroughs and Michael Moorcock (the latter with shockingly little in print in U.S. editions, but much available from Britain). A film from a Burroughs work would be a potentially major event in any case; when the script is co-authored by Moorcock, one's anticipation is really aroused.

It's easy to look down on Burroughs these days. His writing is primitive. His plotting is totally dependent on coincidence — if there's a hero, a heroine, a villain, and a sabre-tooth tiger within a 5,000 square mile area, they're all going to end up in the same place at the same time. His morality is old-fashioned to say the least — Dejah Thoris was willing to see nations go to war and thousands

BAIRD SEARLES

Films



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killed to keep her virtue (or whatever) intact.

Despite this, Burroughs' works still enthrall, as attested by his continuing popularity. His major series are, of course, the Tarzan, Barsoom, Amtor, and Pellucidar; another matter of interest with *The Land That Time Forgot* is that it is the first of a lesser known mini-series, the Caspak trilogy (the others are *The People That Time Forgot* and *Out of Time's Abyss*).

Caspak is a lost continent with the usual complement of prehistoric beasties, etc. Not a new idea, God knows, even for Burroughs (*Pellucidar*) or his time (Doyle's *Lost World*, for instance). But Burroughs here has used a very specific piece of scientific speculattion (rare for him — the scientific elements of his works were usually loosely based, to say the least) which gives the trilogy a flavor of its own. As the expedition from the outside world (a mixed bag of the survivors of a torpedoed ship and the U-boat crew that did the torpedoing) treks northward along Caspak's major river, they hit progressively higher examples of human evolution; the idea is that each individual climbs the evolutionary ladder during his lifetime (in an irresistable phrase in his biography of Burroughs, Richard Lupoff describes it as "the principle that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny").

The chances were, of course, a googol to one that the filmmakers would make of this the usual boobs and brontosaurus flick. That one chance, though, lay in the use of Moorcock as co-scriptwriter (along with James Cawthorn). The prolific Englishman, whatever one thinks of his work, has shown a prodigious flow of imaginative concepts which I, for one, hoped might inject themselves into the script and get past the dunderheads who produce this kind of movie.

Alas, no such luck. Either Moorcock just decided to take the money and run, or any nice touches that were originally scripted got lost along the way.

For one thing, it takes an unconscionable length of time to get to Caspak, and getting there is not half the fun. The ship is torpedoed, the survivors capture the U-boat, the crew recapture the U-boat, the survivors re-recapture the U-boat. Then when they finally do get around to finding the lost continent, it's not even a good boob-and-bronter. The dinosaur sequences are middling to awful (middling stegosaurs and triceratops, modelly-looking tyrannosaurs, *awful* pterodactyls that don't even move their wings, making them look like bad entries in a home made kite contest).

(*continued on pp. 82*)

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Here is a thoughtful and engrossing tale about two men and their very different requiems for a spaceport they had known as schoolboys. Michael Coney's most recent book is *The Jaws that Bite, the Claws that Catch.*

Those Good Old Days Of Liquid Fuel

by MICHAEL G. CONEY

Early that damp December morning I drove to the northernmost tip of the Peninsula where the ferry leaves for the short journey across the Strait. Despite the hour, the queue was long, and I was forced to park on the highway outside the ferry entrance. I was scanning my Newspocket to pass away the time, when my interest was suddenly caught by a news item.

The derelict ships at Pacific Northwest had been sold. A wrecking team was arriving today to start work, and before long a notable landmark — some say an eyesore — would be lost. Other news items followed, flicking across the portovee screen as I sat waiting and the rain slanted against the windows, but I don't recollect them. I was thinking about those ships, and my youth, and how it is that we keep losing little bits of our life without realizing they are gone.

In due course, the ferry arrived, and the long line of ground-effect vehicles stirred like an awakening snake and inched their way into the protective belly of a hoverferry big enough to ride the choppy waves of the Strait. As I sat in the coffee lounge watching the distant mountains while the ferry weaved through the archipelago of islets, a huge silver antigrav vehicle slid silently by at an altitude of about a thousand feet and reminded me that even this ship on which I rode would shortly be phased out — like the shuttle ships at Pacific Northwest. The lounge was crowded and the customers as grey and apathetic as travelers always are at this hour. I wondered what they thought I looked like.

I imagine I looked as well as could be expected, for a man who had just seen a ghost on his portovee...

The weather was clearing by the time we docked at the mainland,

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and the clouds were lifting from the nearer mountains, although still shrouding the gaunt thousand-mile-long escarpment which marks forever the line of the Western Seaboard Slide. My consignment at Sentry Down was not due to arrive until midafternoon, and so I had time to kill; I had taken the early ferry to make sure of getting a place, and now, as had happened before, I was regretting it. There was not much of interest in this part of the country for a man with a few hours to spare.

As I waited in line in the dim hold of the hoverferry, I debated whether to drive straight to Sentry Down and spend the rest of the morning in the observation lounge watching the arrivals and departures. There had been definite signs of blue sky in that direction, and the terminal would be busy and therefore interesting — or lonely, according to the mood I was in. Then I recalled that Sentry Down was *always* busy; the antigrav shuttles could descend from the orbiting starships at any speed they chose, hovering in crowded columns of traffic, reversing direction if necessary, inching down through the heaviest cloud.

Unlike the obsolete liquid-fuel ships at Pacific Northwest, doomed and now destined for the breaker's yard....

Some years ago the development of the first commercially viable antigrav orbit-shuttle had burst upon the space-transport world like a nova. Boeing-Toyota had been first in the field with the Stratolift; you can still see a number of these machines about today as a tribute to sound design in a rapidly developing field. The shuttle business was immediately revolutionized; these new machines were virtually silent and almost infinitely controllable; they could therefore be used in close proximity to the large centers of population.

So the old-style roaring spaceport miles from the nearest city became unnecessary and obsolete, replaced by a thousand small fields such as Sentry Down, quiet and sedate and safe... and soulless. Pacific Northwest was closed down although not entirely deserted, because many of the larger operators such as the Hetherington Organization had mothballed their liquid-fuel shuttle ships there, leaving behind a skeleton maintenance staff to keep the vandals away — God knows why.

And now at last, all those old ships had been sold and would shortly fall to the wrecker's lasers.

Pacific Northwest is two hundred miles from the ferry terminal, away in the mountain foothills. Two hours drive, then two hours back. I glanced at my watch. I could drive there, spend an hour or

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two looking around, and still have time to get to Sentry Down, pick up my consignment of breeding slithes from Coprahedra IV, and catch the last ferry home.

It would be good to see Pacific Northwest again.

I suppose it was natural that I should think of Charlesworth as I drove north through the undulating foothills. Charlesworth and my childhood and Pacific Northwest seemed to go together, an indivisible trinity forever fixed in my memory. Charlesworth and the rockets and that girl of his — what was her name? — Annette. Charlesworth's first love, and possibly his last.

I wondered what Charlesworth was doing now; at high school he, like me, had studied Galactic languages and geography — subjects singularly useless in everyday life, as I have since found out. I now rear slithes for their skins at an impoverished farm on the coast of the Peninsula. I recollect reading once that Charlesworth had gone into the titanium business down the coast, but again I'm not sure. Whatever it was, you can be sure that it bore no connection with languages or geography. It's odd how a man can lose touch with people; as a youth of fifteen I would never have believed the day would come when I didn't know Charlesworth's address.

As I topped a rise, the land before me lay low and smooth, a vast bowl rimmed by hills and, to the east, snow-capped mountains. The road eased downhill directly into the center of this bowl, where stood huge blocks of grey glass and concrete buildings, dull and damp and abandoned; even from this distance I fancied I could see grass growing in the geometric streets. As though to suit my mood, the rain had begun again, drifting across the landscape as the rise of the mountains squeezed wetness from the west wind.

I drove through the straight main street, and the empty windows gaped at me in blind astonishment; then I turned left and the abandoned stores and office blocks petered out almost immediately. To my right stood the shell of the college; at some time in the past a fire had shattered the windows and stained the walls in dead black streaks; yet the general outline of the place was still capable of evoking nostalgia. I remembered the anxiety of my parents when they found that the college was so close to the spaceport; the principal assured them that the place was totally soundproofed, but for weeks afterward I dared not ask my mother to repeat any remark she

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made, for fear she would conclude I was going deaf.

"I can't think why we had to come and live here," she said to my father one evening as we sat around the 3-V alcove and the rockets were a mere rumble in the distance.

"What's that you say?" My father cupped a hand to his ear — a habit of his, born of his job as maintenance supervisor at Pacific Northwest. "I can't hear you for this damned 3-V."

If my mother had known just how I spent my leisure hours, she would have had genuine cause for worry.

It was at the college that I met Charlesworth; he was my age — fourteen at that time. I had noticed him but never actually spoken to him; boys can be like that. One day I was involved in a brawl and had hit a girl — not entirely by accident — who had fallen to the ground screaming. Annette LaRouge was a popular figure, and I suddenly found myself the center of mass antagonism. I withdrew rapidly to a distant washroom where I met Charlesworth staunching the flow of blood from his nose; in mutual sympathy we struck up a friendship which lasted through college.

I debated whether to stop and look around the wrecked buildings but decided against it; my memories there were not happy ones. In common with most people, my schooldays had been haunted by fear. Fear of retribution for the incomplete assignment, fear of the strong boy with small eyes and big fists, fear of finding myself in a class of total strangers listening to a subject of total incomprehensibility. Fear, in such a case, of finding I was in the wrong room — or worse still, the right room.

The good times had been after school hours, in the summer evenings and throughout the long weekends when time passed so much more slowly than it does now. These had been the times when Charlesworth and I gained illegal entry to the spaceport and stood watching from close range as the shuttles came in. These were the times I was thinking about as I drove the last mile across the open scrubland and through the huge archway, past the terminal buildings and onto the vast concrete field where the old ships stood, some squat like crabs, some taller than the buildings themselves — and all of them beautiful.

After twenty years, I had come back to Pacific Northwest.

Charlesworth was a leader. It was he who had found the way under the tall wire fence at the point where there was an underground shelter.

"In case a ship blows up," he explained with relish. There were

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two entrances to the shelter, one from outside the wire, one inside. We merely walked down the steps, through the concrete corridor, and up the steps at the far end. Then, there we were — and my stomach always heaved with glory at this point — standing on the landing area itself, about a half mile from the terminal buildings. All around stood the shuttle ships, large and small, passenger and freight, some bearing the insignia of International Space Services. These we despised. Most of the craft, however, were privately owned by corporations with flamboyant livery and evocative names such as Rendezvous, Inc., Orbitry, Circular Spaceways, First Step, Black Midnight Meetings, and the more prosaic Sid's Shuttles, whose craft always looked in need of maintenance.

Then there were the deep-space pinnaces, those glamorous vessels owned by the giant Galactic corporations so wealthy that they could afford to operate — and more important carry through space — their own shuttle craft. These ships were rare birds of passage, and we would constantly be scanning the bulletins for news of their arrival, then hurrying to the spaceport after school to feast our young eyes on the craft which had come from many light-years away; some of them, in fact, had not even been built on Earth. The pinnaces would belong to such corporations as the Hetherington Organization and Cosmic Enterprises and would be carried in the bellies of the giant starships across the reaches of deep space, bearing witness to the wealth of their owners at every planetfall across the Galaxy.

Charlesworth and I were enthralled by all these, both equally eager to spend every spare moment watching their arrival and departure, equally grudging of every moment wasted in school — yet we differed in our attitude towards the ships in a very fundamental way.

"I mean, Sagar," he said to me one day, as we had flinched to the thunderous touchdown of *Leviathan*, shuttle ship number 11 of the oddly named Up and Down Under, Pty., "just where do you get your kicks? Like, you watched that tub as though you'd never seen it before."

"Today was the first time I've seen Old Legs land today," I said carefully. We had our own names for regular visitors. There was no way I could explain to Charlesworth that I enjoyed watching Number Eleven touch down equally as much as the rarest pinnace from the furthest outpost.

That was the difference between us.

Charlesworth was a collector.

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He carried with him a little book — it was almost as though it had been published with him in mind — listing every conceivable ship which might land at any Earth spaceport. It was prepared in co-operation with all the larger operators and most of the smaller ones, and was intended for official use only. Charlesworth, however, had obtained a contraband copy, and whenever he saw a ship, he consulted his book. If he had never seen that particular vessel before, he checked it off neatly in green ink and was deliriously happy. I got a kick out of watching him. He would regard the blasting jets of a descending ship raptly — as did I — but as soon as he was able to identify it, his interest was transferred to the printed page. His ratlike face intent, he would scrutinize his list. In the majority of cases he would then frown with disgust, shutting the book with a snap and kicking moodily at a rock, or belching loudly. Charlesworth's was a dead-end passion. The moments of happiness grew fewer as the check marks in his book multiplied like algae, and as I looked over his shoulder, I could estimate to within a few months when he would quit the hobby, or maybe shoot himself.

The area around the underground shelter developed its own history; Charlesworth and I were not the only enthusiasts who would gather there at weekends, and after a while it became possible for talk to grow nostalgic, as we reminisced about the rocky landing of the First Step *Victory*, last September, or the exploits of Stagg, who was no longer with us, having kicked the habit.

Stagg's period of ascendancy had been brief but memorable — he had bequeathed to us Stagg's Tower. This was a steel structure beside the shelter; to the uninitiated it might appear as a prosaic water tower, but to us it was Stagg's Tower, and always will be.

A steel ladder climbed from the base of the tower to the tank some forty feet above. In the late afternoons when the novelty of the ships began to wane, we used to compete against one another on the ladder. We would see who could jump from the greatest altitude. I imagine the record, held by Charlesworth who had nerves of titanium, was in the region of fifteen feet. Nobody ever thought to climb any higher than that, let alone jump; such a feat was only attained by the godlike astronautic maintenance men of Pacific Northwest.

But Stagg did not like Charlesworth and was determined to wrest the record from his enemy. In order to achieve this he first got drunk — but mildly, so that we

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wouldn't notice and therefore disqualify him. In fact, Stagg's inebriation did not come to light until the next day, when the principal made his famous "Shun the Shuttles" speech at the college.

It was a Sunday afternoon when Stagg appeared, greeted us, and with no further notice of intent turned to the ladder and began steadily to climb.

I have found since that drink can play tricks on the memory. So I assume that Stagg, who was gazing upwards as he went, lost track of just how high he was. He reached the really difficult part where the ladder takes a slight overhang before climbing the side of the tank itself, before he stopped and turned, all set to jump. Then he found he was thirty feet up, and froze. We shouted encouragement, and Charlesworth even hurled a few stones which clanged off the tank next to his head, but there was no way we could help Stagg. His nerve had gone.

His moment of glory was yet to come, however. After some discussion it was agreed we send for help, and our smallest member, named Wilkins, was dispatched to notify the authorities. Wilkins, however, went straight home. The following day, when the principal in the course of his address called for the members of our group to step forward and identify themselves, Wilkins stood motionless and treacherous. Nobody else moved either — but the point is that Wilkins didn't. Two wrongs, as my mother used to say with distressing frequency, do not make a right.

We waited for an hour while the white face of Stagg peered down at us from the sky, and every so often the ground and the tower would shudder as a shuttle lifted off. Then, unexpectedly, a scarlet maintenance vehicle swayed towards us, and within seconds we were through the tunnel and outside the wire. Uniformed men glanced at us, held a muttered discussion; then one of them began to climb, calling encouragement to Stagg. The man sounded enormously sympathetic and reasonable about the whole affair. Stagg wasn't to worry. Stagg wasn't to look down. Stagg had only to hold on for just one second more; then his new friend would be beside him, and everything would be all right.

Stagg's reply was simple and graphic. As the uniformed official reached up, hand outstretched to Stagg's ankle, smiling, comforting and assuring that the whole thing would be forgotten just as soon as they were down, Stagg vomited....

It was a cold December midmorning as I walked across the abandoned concrete towards my memories; although the surface was pitted and grass oozed from the

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cracks like gangrene, the water tower still stood. Standing also were the ships. I walked under the squat shape of *Rendezvous III,* and the rusting brown belly dripped chill water over me. Further on, the tall figure of *Vulcan* stood a little apart from the others; I glanced up into the powerful mystery of the tail pipes, then moved on, turning once to admire that sleek classic shape which had never ceased to thrill my boyhood emotions.

No doubt we were sublimating our adolescent urges in those days, but in our innocence we thought we were watching the spaceships.

Our urges did not go entirely sublimated, however. There was a day in June when Charlesworth and I were the only people in the spotting spot, as we called it; the ferry from Intertrade *Crusader* had just touched down in a storm of flame and din and sweet indescribable stench of exhaust. Charlesworth ignored the ferry; he had seen it before, many times. He was telling me about Hetherington pinnace number 4, which was the only craft owned by that Galactic corporation as yet unchecked in his little book. Having never seen the ship, I was not especially interested, but Charlesworth lived for the day when Hetherington Number 4 would touch down.

We were alone, and I was happy just to see and breathe spaceships, but Charlesworth was discontented. I think even he was beginning to get an inkling of the blind alley into which his enthusiasms were leading him — or maybe he had reached a certain age. I remember thinking that day, that maybe a guy grew out of spaceships — that the day would eventually come when, inconceivably, the sight of a liftoff would leave him unmoved. In which case, I concluded, he would truly have joined the ranks of the adults, with their lukewarm hobbies and obsession with work, with success, with women, with all the dull colors of boredom.

So it could be said that the thought of women crossed my mind, that June afternoon.

Charlesworth's earnest voice droned on as he anticipated in fullest detail the orgasm of delight which would be his when Number Four touched down. I was standing on the fifth rung of Stagg's Tower, and my gaze had inexplicably strayed from the perfect contours of Intertrade *Crusader II* across the rough pasture outside the wire; to my disgust I saw two girls approaching, a large black animal bounding around them. Even at this distance I recognized the queen of grade 9, Annette LaRouge with her courtier Rita Coggins. They had seen me and were threading

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their way through the tussocks in the direction of the tunnel under the wire.

"LaRouge is coming," I interrupted Charlesworth. "And Bunny."

"What for?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"Let's hide, Sagar, for Christ's sake."

"They've seen me."

"So bloody what? We can't have girls here. It's... not right. They'd be in the way."

I sympathized with his view; it is the outlook which, later in life, I encounter in men's clubs everywhere. It implies nothing personal, nor even a generalized male chauvinism; it is merely that a certain type of person must be excluded from activities which do not concern them and would not interest them. It is coincidental that the type of person excluded is of the opposite sex.

While we were discussing the problem, the huge black paracat came bounding from the darkness of the tunnel and jumped Charlesworth. I climbed two rungs higher, well out of the reach of even this agile beast.

"For Christ's sake, call him off!" howled Charlesworth, his thin face contorted with fear. The paracat had its paws on his shoulders and was peering seriously into his eyes, as though it had something important to tell him.

In fact paracats are reputed to be telepathic, but only among their own species. The natives of their home planet train them for hunting, but on Earth they are pets and, if truth be known, conversation pieces. For several years they were a popular status symbol, and people even organized shows and laid stress on physical characteristics by which they could tell, so they said, whether or not an animal was of the stuff that champions were made — but in recent years they have almost died out. Far more interesting pets can be wrought from life already existing here on Earth, with a little ingenuity — as witness the recent popularity of land sharks.

"Bagheera!" Annette LaRouge climbed the last few steps out of the tunnel and stepped sedately into the sunshine, somehow managing to ignore Charlesworth's presence as her pet returned to her side. She settled herself carefully on the grass bank at the side of the tunnel entrance, flanked on one side by her rabbit-faced friend Rita, on the other side by the still-slavering paracat. She whispered something to Rita, who giggled, then the two girls looked long and poisedly at the nearest rocket, while the awkward silence between Charlesworth and I lengthened.

I climbed down the ladder and

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stood beside him, drawing confidence from his nearness. Behind us, the cool voice spoke.

"Some people waste a lot of time when they ought to be doing something useful, don't they, Rita?"

Rita's reply was inaudible and accompanied by a giggle.

"It's childish," Annette resumed, "collecting numbers of spaceships and writing them down in little books. My brother does it. He's eight. It's kid's stuff."

Rita's whispered reply drew a peal of musical laughter from the grade 9 queen, and I glanced at Charlesworth involuntarily. His face was scarlet.

I whirled round to face the smiling girl. "Look," I spluttered. "Nobody asked you to come here, making remarks. We don't need you. Get back through the tunnel."

She was the same age as Charlesworth and I, but she had the knack of making a guy feel young and immature. She was self-contained, as though she had no need of the admiration and friendship of her fellows. She made us feel dependent and inadequate. I know better now. Looking back from the standpoint of adulthood, I can now realize that Annette LaRouge needed reassurance more than any of us, but at the time it seemed that she was a young woman, whereas Charlesworth and I were kids.

She pretended to ignore my outburst and addressed the pathetic Rita. "Some people ought to learn their manners," she said. She opened a small stylish purse and examined her face in a tiny mirror. "But you can't expect any better from a coward who beats up girls," she added.

I moved closer, feeling a desire violently to destroy her complacency but unsure how to accomplish it. I tried the reasonable approach, matching her calm tones. "Knocking you down doesn't make me a coward. If I'd let *you* knock *me* down, and *I'd* run screaming to the teacher — then I'd be a coward."

"Some people are always making excuses for themselves," she informed Rita, who nodded wisely. To my amazed indignation, I heard Charlesworth chuckle appreciatively, as though the girl had made a telling point.

The one-sided argument was interrupted by the far-off thunder of an arrival from above. We watched as a tiny cloud formed white and drifting as the still-invisible ship descended through its own exhaust gases. Even now, I can still relive the thrill of those touchdowns; the active delight in the vision of power accompanied by the speculative delight of conjecture: Where has it come from? What ship is it, and to which corporation does it belong? And, in

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Charlesworth's case, have I seen it before?

Darting flames were fingering towards us, seemingly straight at us, and the air was a pandemonium of noise and scattering debris. It was a big ship, three-legged and dart-shaped; therefore a fairly old ship. Chances were, I guessed as the flames drew nearer, that it was one of the local shuttles. I glanced at Annette and my heart thumped in unholy joy; here eyes were wide with fear and her mouth open in a drowned scream as she visualized the machine squatting directly onto our position. She clung to the paracat; its ears were laid back and its upper lip curled in a terrified snarl.

Charlesworth and I had slipped on our goggles and watched unconcernedly as the blown dust, stones and waste paper whirled about our heads and the girls snatched at their skirts. The paracat broke free and, tail tucked protectively around its genitals, fled into the tunnel. The ground was trembling now, a fast dull drumming as the throbbing exhaust gases pounded the unyielding concrete with ultrasonics.

The giant legs stepped towards us gingerly, reaching to straddle the circular void of the exhaust pit; and I remembered, as always, the time *Orbiter VIII* had missed its footing, planting two legs firmly on the concrete while the third hung rigid and nervous over the pit; I could hear the acceleration of the engines and imagine the frantic whirring of the gyroscopes as the pilot realized his error, fought to maintain balance and, at last, lifted laboriously off for another try — which, disappointingly for us youthful ghouls, was successful.... Such incidents are the foundation blocks of childhood memories.

The present touchdown afforded no such excitement, however. Charlesworth suddenly lost interest as it became apparent that the ship was old *Leviathan,* the din decreased as the exhaust jetted directly into the pit, and quiet fountains of smoke arose at the perimeter of the field, ducted there by the stygian system of exhaust tunnels linking the pits to the perimeter vents.

A recurrent juvenile nightmare of mine concerned being trapped in those tunnels and hearing an approaching ship....

Leviathan rocked on her legs and was still. Charlesworth and I removed our goggles, and as our ears began to recover, we became aware of Annette screaming, having for once lost her cool.

"My mom and dad'll kill me if I lose Bagheera!"

It seemed to me that this was her problem, but Charlesworth thought otherwise. "Come on,

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Sagar!" he shouted. "He can't have gone far!"

"So bloody what?" I muttered.

"Come on," he repeated, with a sideways glance at Annette. "Have some decency. It won't hurt you to help someone else for once!"

As I look back to that afternoon, I can now realize that, for Charlesworth and I, it represented a milestone. Neither of us was quite the same afterwards; neither was our relationship the same. We gained knowledge and we lost innocence. Charlesworth learned the meaning of love; I learned the meaning of treachery. Thereby we lost simple pleasure, and the relationship between him, me and the ships became more complex. I think we lost trust.

The trio of Charlesworth, Annette and the paracat became a familiar sight around the streets of Pacific Northwest during the next weeks as school finished and the long summer vacation stretched gloriously ahead. I know adults got a kick out of seeing them together and would nudge one another and point them out with sentimental smiles; they thought the sight was innocent and sweet. In fact the adults were the innocent parties; I alone knew — because Charlesworth had confided in me — how he spent sleepless nights sweating with lust as the vision of Annette swayed through his imagination.

All in vain, of course; he wasn't getting anything from her — except permission to trot at her heels in tandem with the paracat and register a devotion which the animal had too much self-respect to emulate. Charlesworth made a complete idiot of himself, that summer.

Occasionally he would show up at the spotting spot, grinning sheepishly. I assumed those were the days when Annette had her hair done. He would punch me on the biceps and call me "man" and try to behave as though nothing had happened — as did I — but as the hours wore on, he would become restless, and I would catch his gaze straying across the scrubland in the direction of the town. He was hoping Annette would come along, but she seldom did. The appalling din of a touchdown at close quarters was too raw for her sensitive nerves.

During those weeks his attitude changed in another way, too. At first he was proud of what he imagined to be his conquest — that was when he made the revelation concerning his lascivious nights — but after a couple of weeks even he realized that Annette was the conqueror, and he began to get a haunted, hangdog look like a kid caught misbehaving.

As Charlesworth went downhill,

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so Annette LaRouge thrived, like a vampire. With school over for the summer she was permitted to assume a more individualistic style of dress, and she took full advantage of this, with strutting high heels, padded bra, no-skirt skirts, and a jeweled collar for the paracat. Even I had to admit that she looked pretty good — but there was no envy of Charlesworth in this private confession. I was scared of her power, scared of what she was doing to Charlesworth and glad that I was well out of it.

Rita Coggin's rabbit features could occasionally be seen in the coffee bar; invariably she would be alone, staring disconsolately into the depths of a cola. She had been dropped because she was a mere hanger-on — unlike Charlesworth who was a genuine sexual conquest, and possibly Annette's first.

Pacific Northwest was a maelstrom of adolescent emotions, that summer.

The tunnel was still there, although smaller than I remembered it; but as I began to descend the steps, I was brought up short by an expanse of black water stretching from the third step across the sloping roof. I had hoped to examine the walls beneath to see if the graffiti were still there, but perhaps it was fortunate that this was impossible. Outside again, I regarded the grassy banks now overgrown with scrub, the tall wire fence rusted and broken down, in some places missing entirely. Stagg's Tower was still intact, although I wouldn't have liked to try an ascent of those decayed wire-thin rungs.

I was vaguely dissatisfied with the place. The memories were there, somewhere, but they would not come to life. They were lost in decay and growth and the strange indescribable way a landscape will rot, when not frequently revisited. Every change seems to be a change for the worse. I should have come here more often, and I should have looked up Charlesworth and brought him along too, and between us we could have coaxed things to life.

I turned and looked at the landing field again, testing my memories on the nearest ship. It was badly stained with dirt and weather but still possessed that economical racy look which characterized the pinnace in the days of liquid fuel, before antigravity stripped shuttles of their soul. The lettering was patchy and faded but legible, and the crest above the name was instantly recognizable; the stylized diagonal spaceship with parallel lightning flash. The words below read HETHERINGTON ORGANIZATION.

There was a number further

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down; I could barely read it. It was the number 4.

That was when my memories really came alive.

One day in late July, I met Charlesworth, for once alone, in the main street. I glanced at him and made to pass by; it seemed he hardly knew me these days, and he hadn't been near the spaceport for weeks. Something about his manner made me look again, however, and mutter a greeting.

"Sagar," he cried, clutching my sleeve, his face more animated than I had seen it for a long time. "Have you heard the news?"

"You've got her pregnant," I said sarcastically, knowing this to be the least likely thing imaginable.

He ignored this. "Are you coming to the spotting spot this afternoon?"

"I thought you'd given all that up."

"Nonsense, man. Nonsense. I've been busy, that's all."

"Wasting your time, I guess."

"It was her father put me onto it," he said meaninglessly. "He said it was about time Bagheera had a mate. He said it was unkind to keep the bastard all alone, but I can tell you, Sagar, the man wants to make money out of it. Paracats cost a fortune, and he means to breed them."

"So he's shipping a female in this afternoon?" I was beginning to see the connection.

"You're quick, Sagar, you're quick. But I'll bet you don't know what else."

"What the hell are you talking about?" His manner was irritating me. Talking to him for the first time in days, I suddenly knew that his manner had always irritated me. There was something unstable about Charlesworth. No man in his right mind could prefer Annette LaRouge to spaceships for example.

"The paracat's coming in Number Four! I was looking at the bills of lading, and I noticed she was coming via Hetherington *Endeavor,* and for the hop down Earthside they're using pinnace number four! Christ!" He waited for me to share his joy.

"That was the ship you wanted to see, was it? One of the last ones on your list?"

His eyes held the old fanaticism. "The *last* number on the list, Sagar. When I've seen Number Four, I've seen them all. Every goddamned one. Every goddamned ship that ever visits the planet Earth, I've seen them all. By Christ. I've waited all my life for this!" His young face peered at me; he looked thinner than ever, intense, with acne erupting all over, which shows what the Annette LaRouges of this world will do to a man's health.

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"Charlesworth," I said, trying to keep a straight face, "you won't have anything left to live for, afterwards."

He eyed me oddly. "You'll never understand, will you. Let me tell you this, Sagar, I hate those bloody ships and all those bloody hours I've wasted watching them and checking them off in that stupid little book. Annette says it's kids' stuff and she's right, by God. This is the last time you'll ever see me at that place. Just this one last time..."

His voice dropped so suddenly that he almost whispered, and an unhealthy tingle passed down my spine. I was in the presence of something I didn't understand. Maybe I do now, but at the age of fifteen I couldn't see how anyone could fail to love and venerate anything so big, so powerful, so virile as a shuttleship. I couldn't understand why Charlesworth should want to *beat* the things in this oblique way, or why he seemed to consider a complete list of numbers as a victory.

"I'll see you at the spotting spot," I said unhappily. Even at my young age, Charlesworth had become a part of my life, and the spaceport would not be the same without him, for all his faults. So many others were losing interest too: Stagg played around with girls all the time; Simpson had left the district; Walker was talking about some nebulous future career... After today, I would be the only one. No matter how much you may dislike your friends, the day will always come when you wish you still had them around.

I was the first to arrive at the spotting spot. The spaceport was quiet, that bright July afternoon, with a quietness that to my juvenile imagination suggested ominous pauses, the lull before the storm, any one of many adult cliches to describe the benefits of hindsight. It just so happened, I told myself determinedly, that the schedules had conspired to desert Pacific Northwest at this particular hour, on this particular day. It was nothing to do with the fact that Charlesworth would soon be here and I was uncertain about his reactions, his motives, or indeed about himself.

When at last I saw him picking his way through the thornbushes, across the long yellowing grass of midsummer, I felt a sudden thud of dismay in my stomach because Annette LaRouge was with him, head high, chest out, paracat frolicking at her heels. This was the ultimate in treachery, for Charlesworth to bring the unspeakable Annette with him on this afternoon of all afternoons.

When they stepped from the tunnel, she ignored me, but

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Charlesworth greeted me with quiet sheepishness, avoiding my eye as he buckled the leash onto the paracat's bejeweled collar at Annette's command.

"These horrible ships frighten him," she informed Charlesworth. "I can't think why you wanted to come."

"Well, I thought we ought to be here...what with your father having another animal coming..."

"Nonsense, Roger," she said firmly. Charlesworth had always professed a hatred for his Christian name. "You just wanted to watch the ships again, that's what you wanted to do." There was an edge to her voice.

These exchanges had cheered me up considerably. It seemed that Charlesworth had, unbelievably, succeeded in imposing his will upon Annette. I addressed him. "It's all confirmed about Number Four, then?"

He stared at me blankly, as though surprised to see me. "What are you talking about, Sagar?"

"You know...you said, this morning..." I stammered, put off by his cold look.

"I don't remember saying anything this morning." And he turned away, turned his damned back on me and began to converse with Annette LaRouge in a pseudoadult fashion which made me want to smash his face in.

It was no good. I should have realized before. Charlesworth and I were through, and had been through for weeks. I moved away a few paces; there is nothing more lonely than standing too close to people who ignore you. I watched them as they chatted like a grown-up couple; Annette with her haughty look and undeniably classic features standing like a posing model. God, how I hated her. At fifteen years old, I found classic features singularly unattractive, preferring plump cheeks and ripe lips, bright eyes and big tits.

And as an adult, my preferences have not changed one iota. Which proves that I was pretty damned mature at the age of fifteen, maybe.

Charlesworth was spoiling the effect somewhat as he struggled to control the fractious paracat, thin sinews standing out on his puny wrists while his rodent face was turned attentively and gravely towards Annette and they discussed Orwell's *1984*, the year's set book, with every appearance of absorption.

At last the pretentious scene was interrupted by the familiar, simple and wonderful thunder from the sky. I looked up and saw the tiny cloud, and from the corner of my eye I saw Charlesworth watching too, and for a moment it was possible to believe that the old times were back. Life is so full at

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that age that a man can become nostalgic about the happenings of last month.

But Annette was still determinedly talking.

Charlesworth missed his cue and earned a sharp look and an enquiry as to the state of his hearing.

I could make out the tiny black dot now, and the little spark was visible even on this bright summer day.

Annette prattled on, and Charlesworth answered with desperate interest.

A light wind was trailing the smoke across the sky like a comet's tail. Charlesworth jerked suddenly as the paracat tugged at the leash.

"But of course, the exaggerated problems met by Winston Smith were inspired by the fears of the age in which Orwell lived."

Maybe she was right, but so what? So what, on a summer's afternoon when a rocket is squatting towards you on scarlet tailfeathers?

"Yeah, I'm sure," muttered Charlesworth, looking up.

And now it was clearly in view, gleaming silver through the smoke and flame, tall and sharp and beautiful, strong talons downhung like a stooping hawk, roaring with power so that the Earth shook.

I watched it with love. Charlesworth watched it.

"Roger! I'm speaking to you!"

No doubt she had more to say, but by now the din was intense, and even Annette turned her gaze upwards, wincing, watching. The silver giant was decelerating, elongating as it dropped towards its exhaust pit; the curved flank came plainly into view. There was a diagonal crest; below, the words HETHERINGTON ORGANIZATION.

And below that, in plain black, the number, 4.

Through the bedlam I heard Charlesworth's yell of triumph, and I turned to look at him. Though I can't describe his expression, I'll never forget it. I think I felt a slight shiver on that hot July afternoon. Nobody should feel like Charlesworth felt about a plain black digit. I noticed that he had dropped the leash, and I think Annette became aware of this at the same instant — because that was when she screamed.

The black beast bounded forward, covering the concrete in giant flowing strides, head tilted back and staring fixedly at the descending ship.

"Stop him, Roger! Stop him! He'll be killed!"

And for an unthinking moment Charlesworth obeyed and ran forward while the fearsome tail pipes bellowed malevolently at him. Then he stopped and turned back,

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looking from Annette to me dazedly, while behind him the paracat bounded on.

Annette's voice cut through the din. "Go *on!* Go *on!* What are you stopping for?"

The ships seem to descend right on top of you; yet the landing areas are some distance away, far across the smooth concrete. This surprising distance is apparent when a truck or embarkation bus pulls alongside a ship.

So it was that the paracat dwindled to a frisking kitten, still looking up as it ran, hearing excitingly in its mind what we could never hear — the irresistible call from female to male, from its telepathic mate in the descending ship....

It never saw the edge of the exhaust pit; it was still staring eagerly upwards as it fell over the lip and disappeared from view.

The giant silver legs touched and flexed. The flames, the smoke knifed down, hit the base of the pit and bounced up again, thick and alive like yeast. The sounds diminished, the perimeter fountains puffed.

I dared to look at Annette and Charlesworth.

I could not tell what they were thinking. I could not tell what Annette was saying, because it was too fast, too bitter, too frightened, and I was too deaf.

I walked quickly to the tunnel and descended the steps. I made my way through the dark shelter and up the other side, beyond the wire where the tall dry grass waved, and it was a different world. I didn't look back, but I knew that Annette and Charlesworth were standing exactly where I had left them, etching in their memories a scene that neither of them would forget.

I had reached the main street of the town before the irony of it occurred to me. Charlesworth's moment of ultimate triumph had been turned into a defeat which might be equally ultimate.

And now there was a sprinkling of snow drifting from the greying skies, and the mountains in the distance were blurred. I kicked idly at a clump of coarse grass which had thrust its way bravely through the decaying concrete, and thought about leaving; there was nothing for me here, now that I had done what I came to do. I had paid my last respects to the ships, and now I must get out before the desolation and the putrefaction impressed itself too deeply on me and erased the happier memories.

Number Four stood there like a cenotaph to my youth, and as I began to walk slowly towards the terminal building, I told myself I had done the right thing in coming

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here. I had obeyed the impulse, I had found — as I had expected to find — that things were not the same, and now I was going.

I had not expected to see anyone else here, yet.

I stopped, moved back beside the tunnel entrance as a hovercar came swaying across the concrete from the terminal buildings, heading fast in my direction. A nervousness tingled in my stomach. Maybe that was another memory, but nevertheless I was trespassing, and I had seen recently on Newspocket that the penalties for trespass had been increased lately, following a shortage of state prisoners. I couldn't understand how they had spotted me — unless someone had been scanning the landing area with binoculars.

Then I noticed four black shapes in the southern sky, and I relaxed. The car was merely the advance guard of the wrecking team, coming to size the place up. They would hardly report a sightseer to the police. All the same, I withdrew into the tunnel entrance; there was no point in taking chances. The car pulled up and sank to the ground nearby; two men climbed out, watching the approach of the ungainly airborne cranes. They were too far away for me to hear what they were saying, but one of them was pointing at the helpless ships standing around, doubtless giving instructions.

The cranes were close now, black and sinister to my prejudiced eye as they hovered above the spaceport like giant vultures. They were functional in shape; skeletal arms projecting at all angles, hooks and magnets hanging, swinging. Their highly efficient antigravity units were almost soundless; just a thin whine drifted down with the snow. They were cold and unthinking, those cranes, robotic and heartless like all antigrav vehicles, and I wanted to get away. I could not bear to witness this, their final victory over their evolutionary predecessors, this destruction of everything my childhood held beautiful.

The two men turned and walked towards me; they saw me standing there but merely nodded briefly; no doubt they were accustomed to idle bystanders at wrecking operations. The smaller man was speaking. His voice was harsh and confident, the voice of authority. He looked up, his sharp features profiled against the grey sky, a faint thin smile on his lips — and the years slipped away....

The nearest crane rotated slowly above the spaceport, and the huge white letters came into view: CHARLESWORTH CONTRACTORS. I've often wondered what lies behind the single minded strength of purpose that can drive

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the unlikeliest man to success; Charlesworth seemed to have done very well for himself.

I almost went forward to speak to him, to renew our acquaintance, but decided not to and made for the terminal buildings instead.

Somehow, I felt we didn't have much in common, any more.

(*Films, from p. 62*)

As for the other department, there is — would you believe — a female biologist, replacing the original Burroughs heroine who rejoiced in the wonderful name of Lys La Rue (mother of Lash, maybe?) and was (gasp!) an actress. The biologist lady needs but one look through a telescope at native women bathing, and one look through a microscope at some little wiggly things to solve the mystery of Caspak's evolutionary methods. But she didn't go so far as to say *anything* about ontogeny or phylogeny, though.

Of course, not all the film's faults can be blamed on the writing (or lack of it) and special effects (or lack of them). The one original idea in the book — the evolutionary set-up — is *not* exactly a visual one, though it might have been made so with a little cinematic expertise. And overall, the movie has no visual style at all. When I mentioned that the film was in the making, I commented that I hoped the art directors could be exposed to a lot of Frazetta's Burroughs cover paintings. If you're going to make an old chestnut like a b&b film, the only hope is to bring to it the kind of visual pizzazz of Franzetta's work, translated into filmic terms.

Things-to-come-dept .... Glitter rock star David Bowie, whose songs have often verged on the science fictional and who came close, a while back, to making his screen debut in a film version of Heinlein's *Stranger*, is starring in a movie of an unmemorable novel called *The Man Who Fell to Earth* by Walter Tevis. It's another alien Messiah variation.

Little-screen-dept .... The fall season got off to a horrendous start with "The Invisible Man" series which is, indeed, as dreadful as its pilot movie of a few months back portended. In the first episode, the IM goes off to Las Vegas to find Howard Hughes (or a fictional facsimile). I didn't stay around to see if he did.

Ultimate-drip-dept ... The Miss America pagent this year included a song and dance production number which ended with the performers, led by Bert Parks, Marching up over the stairs at the back of the stage vocalizing the Zarathustra theme from *2001*. No comment.

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In which baby Leonard is left in charge of his father, Dr. Jonas Freibourg, in Daddy's lab, where he is conducting some delicate experiments...Need more be said?

The Attack of The Giant Baby

by KIT REED

New York City, 9 a.m. Saturday, Sept. 16, 197—: Dr. Jonas Freibourg is at a particularly delicate point in his experiment with electrolytes, certain plant molds and the man within. Freibourg (who, like many scientists, insists on being called Doctor although he is in fact a Ph.D.) has also been left in charge of Leonard, the Freibourg baby, while Dilys Freibourg attends her regular weekly class in Zen cookery. Dr. Freibourg has driven in from New Jersey with Leonard, and now the baby sits on a pink blanket in a corner of the laboratory. Leonard, aged fourteen months, has been supplied with a box of Malomars and a plastic rattle; he is supposed to play quietly while Daddy works. *9:20:* Leonard has eaten all the Malomars and is tired of the rattle; he leaves the blanket, hitching along the laboratory floor. Instead of crawling on all fours, he likes to pull himself along with his arms, putting his weight on his hands and hitching in a semisitting position. *9':30:* Dr. Freibourg scrapes an unsatisfactory culture out of the petri dish. He is not aware that part of the mess misses the bin marked for special disposal problems and lands on the floor.

9:30½: Lenoard finds the mess and like all good babies investigating foreign matter, puts it in his mouth. *9:31:* On his way back from the autoclave, Dr. Freibourg trips on Leonard. Leonard cries and the doctor picks him up.

"Whussamadda, Lennie, whussamadda, there, there, what's that in your mouth?" Something crunches. "Ick ick, spit it out, Lennie, Aaaaa, Aaaaa, AAAAAA."

At last the baby imitates its father: "Aaaaaaaa."

"That's a good boy, Lennie, spit it into Daddy's hand, that's a *good* boy, Yeugh." Dr. Freibourg

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scrapes the mess off the baby's tongue. "Oh, yeugh, Malomar, it's okay, Lennie, OK?"

"Ggg.nnn. K." The baby ingests the brown mess and then grabs for the doctor's nose and tries to put that in his mouth.

Despairing of his work, Dr. Freibourg throws a cover over his experiment, stashes Leonard in his stroller and heads across the hall to insert his key in the self-service elevator, going down and away from the secret laboratory. Although he is one block from Riverside Park, it is a fine day, and so Dr. Freibourg walks several blocks east to join the other Saturday parents and their charges on the benches in Central Park.

10:15: The Freibourgs reach the park. Although he has some difficulty extracting Leonard from the stroller, Dr. Freibourg notices nothing untoward. He sets the baby on the grass. The baby picks up a discarded tennis ball and almost fits it in his mouth.

10:31: Leonard is definitely swelling. Everything he has on stretches, up to a point: T-shirt, knitted diaper, rubber pants, so that, seen from a distance, he may still deceive the inattentive eye. His father is deep in conversation with a pretty divorcee with twin poodles, and although he checks on Leonard from time to time, Dr. Freibourg is satisfied that the baby is safe.

10:35: Leonard spots something bright in the bushes on the far side of the clearing. He hitches over to look at it. It is, indeed, the glint of sunlight on the fender of a moving bicycle, and as he approaches, it recedes; so he has to keep approaching.

10:37: Leonard is gone. It may be just as well because his father would most certainly be alarmed by the growing expanse of pink flesh to be seen between his shrinking T-shirt and the straining waistband of his rubber pants.

10:50: Dr. Freibourg looks up from his conversation to discover that Leonard has disappeared. He calls.

"Leonard. Lennie."

10:51: Leonard does not come.

10:52: Dr. Freibourg excuses himself to hunt for Leonard.

11:52: After an hour of hunting Dr. Freibourg has to conclude that Leonard hasn't just wandered away, he is either lost or stolen. He summons park police.

1 p.m.: Leonard is still missing.

In another part of the park, a would-be mugger approaches a favorite glen. He spies something large and pink; it half fills the tiny clearing. Before he can run, the pink phenomenon pulls itself up, clutching at a pine for support, topples, and accidentally sits on him.

1:45: Two lovers are frightened by unexplained noises in the woods,

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sounds of crackling brush and heavy thuddings accompanied by a huge, wordless maundering. They flee as the thing approaches, gasping out their stories to an incredulous policeman, who detains them until the ambulance arrives to take them to Bellevue.

At the sound of what they take to be a thunder crack, a picnicking family returns to the picnic site to find their food missing, plates and all. They assume this is the work of a bicycle thief but are puzzled by a pink rag left by the marauder: it is a baby's shirt, stretched beyond recognition and ripped as if by a giant, angry hand.

2 p.m.: Extra units join park police to widen the search for missing Leonard Freibourg, aged fourteen months. The baby's mother arrives, and after a pause for recriminations she leaves her husband's side to augment the official description: that was a sailboat on the pink shirt, and those are puppy dogs printed on the Carter's dress-up rubber pants. The search is complicated by the fact that police have no way to knowing that the baby they are looking for is not the baby they are going to find.

4:45: Leonard is hungry. Fired by adventure, he has been chirping and happy up till now, playing doggie with a stray Newfoundland which is the same relative size as his favorite stuffed Scottie at home. Now the Newfoundland has used its last remaining strength to steal away, and Leonard remembers he is hungry. What's more, he's getting cranky because he has missed his nap. He begins to whimper.

4:45 1/60: With preternatural speed, the distraught mother hears. "It's Leonard," she says.

At the sound, park police break out regulation slickers and cap covers and put them on. One alert patrolman feels the ground for tremors. Another says, "I'd put up my umbrella if I was you, Lady; there's going to be a helluva storm."

"Don't be ridiculous," Mrs. Freibourg says. "It's only Leonard, I'd know him anywhere." Calls. "Leonard, it's Mommy."

"I don't know what it is, lady, but it don't sound like any baby."

"Don't you think I know my own child?" She picks up a bullhorn. "Leonard, it's me, Mommy. Leonard, Leonard..."

From across the park, Leonard hears.

5 p.m.: The WNEW traffic-control helicopter reports a pale, strange shape moving in a remote corner of Central Park. Because of its apparent size, nobody in the helicopter links this with the story of the missing Freibourg baby. As the excited reporter radios the particulars and the men in the

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control room giggle at what they take to be the first manifestations of an enormous hoax, the mass begins to move.

5:10: In the main playing area, police check their weapons as the air fills with the sound of crackling brush and the earth begins to tremble as something huge approaches. At the station houses nearest Central Park on both East and West Sides, switchboards clog as apartment dwellers living above the tree line call in to report the incredible thing they've just seen from their front windows.

5:11: Police crouch and raise riot guns; the Freibourgs embrace in anticipation; there is a hideous stench and a sound as if of rushing wind, and a huge shape enters the clearing, carrying bits of trees and bushes with it gurgling with joy.

Police prepare to fire.

Mrs. Freibourg rushes back and forth in front of them, protecting the huge creature with her frantic body. "Stop it, you monsters, it's my baby."

Dr. Freibourg says, "My baby. Leonard," and in the same moment his joy gives way to guilt and despair. "The culture. Dear heaven, the beta culture. And I thought he was eating Malomars."

Although Leonard has felled several small trees and damaged innumerable automobiles in his passage to join his parents, he is strangely gentle with them. "M.m.-m.m.m.m." he says, picking up first his mother and then his father. The Freibourg family exchanges hugs as best it can. Leonard fixes his father with an intent, cross-eyed look that his mother recognizes.

"No, no," she says sharply. "Put it down."

He puts his father down. Then, musing, he picks up a police sergeant, studies him and puts his head in his mouth. Because Leonard has very few teeth, the sergeant emerges physically unharmed, but flushed and jabbering with fear.

"Put it *down*," says Mrs. Freibourg. Then, to the lieutenant: "You'd better get him something to eat. And you'd better find some way for me to change him," she adds, referring obliquely to the appalling stench. The sergeant looks puzzled until she points out a soiled mass clinging to the big toe of the left foot. "His diaper is a mess." She turns to her husband. "You didn't even change him. And what did you do to him while my back was turned?"

"The beta culture," Dr. Freibourg says miserably. He is pale and shaken. "It works."

"Well, you'd better find some way to reverse it," Mrs. Freibourg says. "And you'd better do it soon."

"Of course, my dear," Dr. Freibourg says, with more confi-

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dence than he actually feels. He steps into the police car waiting to rush him to the laboratory. "I'll stay up all night if I have to."

The mother looks at Leonard appraisingly. "You may have to stay up all week."

Meanwhile, the semi filled with unwrapped Wonder Bread and the tank truck have arrived with Leonard's dinner. His diaper has been arranged by one of the Cherokee crews that helped build the Verrazano Narrows bridge, with preliminary cleansing done by hoses trained on him by the Auxiliary Fire Department. Officials at Madison Square Garden have loaned a tarpaulin to cover Leonard in his hastily constructed crib of hoardings, and graffitists are at work on the outsides. "Paint a duck," Mrs Freibourg says to one of the minority groups with spray cans, "I want him to be happy here." Leonard cuddles the life-sized Steiff rhinoceros loaned by FAO Schwartz and goes to sleep.

His mother stands vigil until almost midnight, in case Leonard cries in the night, and across town, in his secret laboratory, Dr. Freibourg has assembled some of the best brains in contemporary science to help him in his search for the antidote.

Meanwhile, all the major television networks have established prime-time coverage, with camera crews remaining on the site to record late developments.

At the mother's insistence, riot-trained police have been withdrawn to the vicinity of the Plaza. The mood in the park is one of quiet confidence. Despite the lights and the magnified sound of heavy breathing, fatigue seizes Mrs. Freibourg, and some time near dawn, she sleeps.

5 a.m. Sunday, Sept. 17: Unfortunately, like most babies, Leonard is an early riser. Secure in a mother's love, he wakes up early and sneaks out of his crib, heading across 79th Street and out of the park, making for the river. Although the people at the site are roused by the creak as he levels the hoardings and the crash of a trailer accidentally toppled and then carefully righted, it is too late to head him off. He has escaped the park in the nick of time, because he has grown in the night, and there is some question as to whether he would have fit between the buildings on East 79th Street in another few hours.

5:11: Leonard's mother arrives. She is unable to attract his attention because he has put down the taxi and is splashing his hands in the water, swamping boats for several miles on either side of him.

Across town, Dr. Freibourg has succeeded in shrinking a cat to half size, but he can't find any way to

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multiply the dosage without emptying laboratories all over the nation to make up enough of the salient ingredient. He is frantic because he knows there isn't time.

5:15: In the absence of any other way to manage the problem, fire hoses are squirting milk at Leonard, hit-or-miss. He is enraged by the misses and starts throwing his toys.

The National Guard, summoned when Leonard started down 79th Street to the river, attempts to deter the infant with light artillery.

Naturally the baby starts to cry.

5:30: Despite his mother's best efforts to silence him with bullhorn and Steiff rhinoceros proffered at the end of a giant crane, Leonard is still bellowing.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff arrive and attempt to survey the problem. Leonard has more or less filled the river at the point where he is sitting. His tears have raised the water level,threatening to inundate portions of the FDR Drive. Speaker trucks simultaneously broadcasting recordings of "Chitty-Chitty Bang Bang" have reduced his bellows to sobs, so the immediate threat of buildings collapsing from the vibrations has been minimized, but there is still the problem of shipping, as he plays boat with tugs and barges but, because of his age, is bored easily, and has thrown several toys into the harbor, causing shipping disasters along the entire Eastern Seaboard. Now he is lifting the top off a building and has begun to examine its contents, picking out the parts that look good to eat and swallowing them whole. After an abbreviated debate, the Joint Chiefs discuss the feasability of nuclear weaponry of the limited type. They have ruled out tranquilizer cannon because of the size of the problem, and there is some question as to whether massive doses of poison would have any effect.

Overhearing some of the top-level planning, the distraught mother has seized Channel Five's recording equipment to make a nationwide appeal. Now militant mothers from all the boroughs are marching on the site, threatening massive retaliation if the baby is harmed in any way.

Pollution problems are becoming acute.

The UN is meeting around the clock.

The premiers of all the major nations have sent messages of concern with guarded offers of help.

6:30: Leonard has picked the last good bits from his building, and now he has tired of playing fire truck, and he is bored. Just as the tanks rumble down East 79th Street, leveling their cannon and the SAC bombers take off from

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their secret base, the baby plops on his hands and starts hitching out to sea.

6:34: The baby has reached deep water now. SAC planes report that Leonard, made buoyant by the enormous quantities of fat he carries, is floating happily; he has made his breakfast on a whale.

Dr. Freibourg arrives. "Substitute ingredients. I've found the antidote."

Dilys Freibourg says, "Too little and too late."

"But our baby."

"He's not our baby any more. He belongs to the ages now."

The Joint Chiefs are discussing alternatives. "I wonder if we should look for him."

Mrs. Freibourg says, "I wouldn't if I were you."

The Supreme Commander looks from mother to Joint Chiefs. "Oh, well, he's already in international waters."

The Joint Chiefs exchange looks of relief. "Then it's not our problem."

Suffused by guilt, Dr. Freibourg looks out to sea. "I wonder what will become of him."

His wife says, "Wherever he goes, my heart will go with him, but I wonder if all that salt water will be good for his skin."

COMING SOON: THE ATTACK OF THE GIANT TODDLER.

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SILENT VICTORY

I was present not long ago at a very elaborate banquet at which the famous lawyer, Louis Nizer, delivered one of the two major addresses. It took the form of a skillful, optimistic view of the future of mankind, delivered with perfect eloquence and without notes. It was, in fact, a superlative science-fiction oration and since I was there at the head table with him, I couldn't help but squirm. I was being beaten in my own field — and by an outsider.

Within fifteen minutes after he was done, it was my turn, but I was one of fifty (literally fifty) and I was expected to speak only a couple of minutes. I think it was also expected that I would spend my couple of minutes expressing a humble acknowledgement of my gratitude at the honor being paid me (along with the forty-nine). However, my talent for humility is poorly developed and there was something else I wanted to do.

I said (speaking rapidly so to get it out within the time-limit): "Mr. Nizer has given you an excellent picture of a wonderful future, and since I am a science-fiction writer, I can't help but envy the clarity and eloquence of his vision. However, we must remember that the various governments of Earth are,

ISAAC ASIMOV

Science

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in these complex times of ours, the direct mediators of change, and it is they who largely determine the nature, quantity, direction, and efficiency of change. We must also remember that most governments are in the hands of lawyers; certainly our own is. The question, then, is what may we expect of lawyers?

"And in that connection, there is the story of the physician, the architect and the lawyer who once, over friendly drinks, were discussing the comparative ancientness of their respective professions.

"The physician said, 'On Adam's first day of existence, the Lord God put him into a deep sleep, removed a rib and from it created a woman. Since that was undoubtedly a surgical operation, I claim that medicine is the world's oldest profession.'

" 'Wait a moment,' said the architect, 'I must remind you that on the very first day of creation, six days at least before the removal of Adam's rib, the Lord God created heaven and earth out of chaos. Since that has to be considered a structural feat, I maintain that architecture takes pride of place.'

" 'Ah, yes,' purred the lawyer, 'but who do you think created the chaos?' "

And my heart was gladdened when the roar of laughter I got bore promise of being (and indeed turned out to be in the end) the loudest and most prolonged of the entire evening. — And Mr. Nizer was laughing, too, I was relieved to see.

The story has a point right here, too.

Last month, I spoke about ozone. In our daily life, we encounter ozone (made up of three atoms of oxygen per molecule) because it is formed out of the ordinary two-atom oxygen molecule that is so common in the atmosphere.

But what do you suppose created the ordinary oxygen?

No, not a lawyer —

An atmosphere containing as much free oxygen as our does is thermodynamically unstable. That means that, left to itself, the free oxygen would gradually disappear. For one thing it would slowly react with the nitrogen and water vapor in the air and produce nitric acid.

This would happen very slowly, to be sure, but Earth has been in existence for 4.6 billion years. All the oxygen would have combined by now, especially since the energy of the lightning bolt hastens the reaction and produces perceptible amounts of nitric acid which serve the purpose

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of helping to renew the dry land's supply of fertilizing nitrates.

If all the oxygen were combined with nitrogen and the resulting nitric acid were to end in the ocean (as it would), then the ocean would be sufficiently acid to make life as we know it impossible.

Well, why hasn't the ocean turned acid long ago? Or if not, why is it not slowly turning acid today? The small quantities of nitric acid that form nitrates in the soil and ocean are taken up by the living organisms on land and sea, and eventually they come out in the form of nitrogen, oxygen and water again.

The nitrogen and oxygen roll downhill, so to speak, in forming nitric acid, while living organisms kick the nitric acid back uphill as fast as it is formed. Living organisms do this at the expense of energy they gain from chemicals within their tissues, chemicals that were formed originally, in one way or another, by the use of solar energy. It is therefore the energy of the Sun, by way of living organisms, that keeps the oxygen of our atmosphere in its free state and makes animal life, our own included, possible.

This sounds like arguing in a circle. Is life possible only because of something life does? In that case, how did life get started?

The circle isn't really closed, however. It is animal life that can't exist without free oxygen. Nor can any form of animal life maintain an oxygen atmosphere. It is plant life that maintains the oxygen atmosphere and that can, in a pinch, do without free oxygen. Animal life is parasitic on plant life and cannot exist (in the form known to us on Earth) in the absence of plant life.

But then there was a time on Earth when plant life didn't exist either, when no life at all existed. Free oxygen did not then exist in the atmosphere; it couldn't have. Did this mean that the oxygen existed in combination with nitrogen and that Earth had an ocean that was dilute nitric acid? The answer is no, for in that case it seems doubtful that life, as we know it, would have developed.

If oxygen and nitrogen were not combined with each other, they must each have been combined with something else. The only possible something else is hydrogen, which is in vast oversupply in the Universe, which makes up the bulk of the two largest bodies of the Solar system (the Sun and Jupiter), and in which the Earth must have been far richer in primordial days than it is now.

Oxygen combined with hydrogen is water (H_2O), and nitrogen combined with hydrogen is ammonia (NH_3). In addition, the common

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element, carbon, can combine with hydrogen to form methane (CH_4). The primordial atmosphere (A-I) could have been made up of ammonia, methane, water vapor and even some quantities of hydrogen itself. Such a hydrogen-rich atmosphere is called a "reducing atmosphere" for reasons that are buried deep in the history of chemistry and that need not concern us. The present oxygen-rich atmosphere is an "oxidizing atmosphere."

Therefore, when considering the origin of life, it is necessary to imagine a process that would go on in a reducing atmosphere.

If a sample of reducing atmosphere and ocean is left to itself, nothing happens. The various compounds — water, ammonia, methane, and hydrogen — are a thermodynamically stable mixture, which means the molecules won't alter into anything else unless there is energy present to kick them uphill.

On the primordial Earth, however, there *was* energy. There was the heat of volcanic action, the heat and ionizing power of lightning, the intense radiation of radioactive atoms, and the steady radiation of the Sun. All these energy sources were more intense on the primordial Earth, in all likelihood, than they are today.

In 1952, the American chemist, Stanley Lloyd Miller, began with a small sample of the primordial atmosphere, used electric sparks as his energy source and, in the course of a week, found that the simple molecules had combined to form somewhat more complicated molecules, including a couple of the amino acids that form the building blocks out of which those essential life-molecules, the proteins, are formed. Since then, further experiments in this direction have made it quite clear that out of the reducing atmosphere plus ocean plus energy a steady series of changes in the direction of life must have taken place.

Can we say which particular source of energy on the primordial Earth was most responsible for life formation? Consider that of all the forms, Solar radiation is steadiest and most pervasive, and it seems logical to give it the lion's share of credit for our presence here today. In particular, we might thank the especially energetic component of Sunlight, its ultraviolet radiation. Indeed, experiments have specifically shown that ultraviolet light is energetic enough to interact with the chemicals of the primordial atmosphere and set them off on their march toward life. (Ordinary visible light is *not* energetic enough.)

It seems reasonable, further, to suppose that life began in the surface of the ocean. The ocean is made up of a collection of water molecules and

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carries many other useful molecules in solution, notable, in primordial times, ammonia. Ammonia is so soluble in water that by far the largest portion of it would be in the ocean rather than in the atmosphere. Methane and hydrogen are only slightly soluble in water, but would be in plentiful contact with it at the surface.

The "dry" land is actually moist because of tidal actions, rain, and so on, so it isn't inconceivable that chemicals moving in the direction of life might, to a much lesser extent, form in the soil, but, as I shall explain, they don't get very far.

Ultraviolet light has a rather hammering effect. It can slam small molecules together and make larger molecules out of them, true. But can we then suppose that, as the molecules grow larger and larger under the influence of the ultraviolet, they will eventually become large enough and complex enough to possess the beginnings of life?

Unfortunately, as molecules grow larger, they tend to grow more rickety, and the hammer of ultraviolet is likely to knock them apart again. The influence of ultraviolet, then, may set the primordial molecules to combining in the direction of life, but it won't let them get very far in that direction.

On land, there is no escaping the ultra-violet, so that even if complicated molecules form out of the simple primordial ones, they aren't ever likely to become nearly complicated enough for even the most primitive imaginable life. Life, therefore, cannot start on land.

In the ocean, it is different. Compounds formed on the surface by the aciton of ultraviolet can, through random motion, sink to a lower level where the ultraviolet cannot penetrate and there they may survive. Indeed, there may be levels where what ultraviolet that penetrates can supply energy for combination but not for breakdown.

It would seem then, that in the primordial ocean, one would find gradually more complicated molecules as one probed from the very surface downward. The first cases of proto-living substances might have formed some centimeters or decimeters below the surface of the water.

Such life forms may have formed in the first billion years of Earth's existence and for eons thereafter, the situation might have been something like this —

In the topmost layer of the ocean were moderately complex molecules, formed by the energy of the Solar ultraviolet, that served as food for the still more complex life molecules below. Some of the food molecules might

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drift downard and be consumed. More important, on cloudy days or, particularly, at night, the life molecules could somehow drift upward and feed voraciously until the Sun comes out, when they sink again.

We don't know to what level of complexity life forms may have developed in this period. The only traces of life that we can find that date back a billion years or more seem to have arisen from tiny one-celled creatures and nothing more. This is perhaps not surprising. It doesn't take much energy to change ammonia, methane, and water into food chemicals and, conversely, it doesn't release much energy to break them down again.

Primordial life did not have much energy at its command, and it could live and evolve only slowly.

All might have continued to be so to this day if the A-I atmosphere had remain unchanged — but it didn't.

For one thing it lost its hydrogen. Any hydrogen that the primordial Earth may have had in its atmosphere was quickly lost to outer space, since Earth's gravity could not hold its small and quickly moving molecules.

Then, too, the ultraviolet light of the Sun, at its full strength in the upper atmosphere can hammer apart even simple molecules. The water molecule, particularly, can be broken down to hydrogen and oxygen by the action of ultraviolet. This is called "photolysis."

The photolysis of water takes place only high in the atmosphere for the most part. Few water molecules are found so high and the process is slow — but again Earth is long-lived and has time.

The hydrogen that is produced by photolysis is lost to space, but the heavier, less nimble oxygen atoms remain behind. In the presence of free oxygen, however, methane and ammonia are no longer thermodynamically stable. The carbon and hydrogen atoms making up the methane molecule tend to combine with oxygen atoms to form carbon dioxide (CO_2) and water respectively. The hydrogen atoms of the ammonia molecules combine with oxygen to form water, leaving behind the nitrogen atoms which combine to form two atom nitrogen molecules (N_2). The nitrogen would also combine with oxygen, but so much more slowly that the carbon and hydrogen atoms get all the oxygen.

The net result is that the methane/ammonia/hydrogen/water vapor atmosphere (A-I) is slowly converted, through photolysis, to a carbon dioxide/nitrogen/water vapor atmosphere (A-II).

To kick the molecules of A-II uphill to the level of the food-molecules

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took more energy than was the case starting with the molecules of A-I. For that reason the rate of food production declined, and as A-I slowly changed to A-II, a kind of famine spread over the face of the ocean.

The type of organisms that had developed in A-I and that lived on the breakdown of food molecules to ammonia and methane, and that made do with the small quantity of energy made available in the process, must gradually have decreased in numbers in the face of the spreading famine.*

Once A-I had completely turned to A-II, it might seem that the food situation had hit bottom for A-I organisms, but not so. Things grew worse still because of photolysis.

Even after the atmosphere had become completely A-II, photolysis continued to take place, water molecules to break down, hydrogen atoms to escape, and oxygen atoms to remain behind. But now, the oxygen atoms had nothing to combine with but each other. (or, *very* slowly, with nitrogen). Ordinarily, they would form the two-atom oxygen molecule, but in the upper atmosphere, they can, under certain conditions, be kicked further uphill by the energy of ultraviolet light and form three-atom ozone molecules.

Ozone molecules are opaque to almost all the untraviolet range. As more ozone forms, less and less ultraviolet manages to penetrate past it. Thus not only did the A-II atmosphere possess molecules more difficult to change into food, but it began to allow less and less ultraviolet through to make any change at all.

With less and less ultraviolet available, the rate of photolysis (carried on at atmospheric heights well below the regions where ozone is formed) would dwindle as well. This would mean that Atmosphere II would stabilize and that further change would become less and less likely, once the ultraviolet supply at the ocean surface had been virtually shut off.

At the present time, ozone is concentrated between heights of 25 to 65 kilometers above Earth's surface, but even there only one molecule out of 100,000 (of an atmosphere that is excessively thin at such heights) is ozone.

Even though the ozone molecules are exceedingly rare by ordinary standards, they suffice to shut out almost all the ultraviolet and leave very little to reach Earth's surface (enough to sunburn light-skinned people such as myself, to be sure, so I'm intelligent enough to stay out of the sun).

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* *They never entirely disappeared, to be sure, for there are still organisms alive today that live on types of chemical reactions other than those of most life-forms. They are very likely descendants, fundamentally unchanged, of A-I life-forms.*

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Life on Earth would have had to dwindle to a very low level, supported by the subsidiary energy sources of lightning, radioactivity and volcanic heat, and have continued so indefinitely, but for an unexpected happening.

Somehow (we don't know the details) and at some time (we don't know exactly when) the most important evolutionary development, next to the beginning of life itself, came about. A chlorophyll-like molecule must have been developed, together with a primitive enzyme system, capable of catalyzing the combination of carbon dioxide and water to form food molecules. This was the beginning of "photosynthesis."

The development of photosynthesis by organisms adapted to A-II meant the following:

1) Until then, ultraviolet light was the motivating force for the production of food, but photosynthesis made use of the less energetic wavelengths of visible light. Since visible light is more copious in solar radiation than ultraviolet is, it could be the source of a potentially much larger supply of food.

2) Since photosynthesis takes place amid the very molecules of the life form, the food is formed there and does not have to be hunted for in the ocean generally. This must have meant that cells could become larger and more complex.

3) Since visible light is *not* blocked by ozone, the A-II photosynthetic organisms were unaffected by the slow closing of the ozone curtain and could flourish even while the A-I organisms faded.

4) In converting methane, ammonia and water into food chemicals, the general atomic makeup remains largely unchanged and there is little "waste" left over. In using water and carbon dioxide as the source of food, however, we begin with molecules containing more oxygen atoms than is required for the food. Those oxygen atoms must be discarded as "waste" and are dumped into the atmosphere.

The existence of photosynthesis, then, hastened the rate at which free oxygen was poured into the atmosphere. Indeed, photosynthesis produced free oxygen at a rate far, far beyond that of photolysis. The ozone curtain began to close at a precipitously greater and greater rate so that A-II life forms, by means of the new chemistry they had evolved, actually hastened, very markedly, the demise of the A-I life forms. Without moving from the spot and without any obvious aggression, they won a silent victory of planetary scope, one scarcely rivaled in extent since.

5) Photosynthetic life forms flourished so mightily that they

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consumed the carbon dioxide of the atmosphere, incorporating the carbon into their own tissues and filling the air with oxygen instead. In this way, through the action of life, the nitrogen/carbon dioxide A-II was changed over to the nitrogen/oxygen A-III of today.

The concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere today is only 0.035 percent as compared to oxygen's 21 percent. In fact, it would seem to be useful to the plant world, generally, to have as parasites on them life forms that consume oxygen and produce carbon dioxide. These would serve to increase, at least by a little, the carbon dioxide of the air. Thus A-II life forms were differentiated into plants and animals, whereas A-I life forms may never have advanced beyond the bacterial stage.

6) A-II life forms developed enzyme systems capable of handling the very active oxygen molecules. A-I life forms apparently did not do so. Free oxygen was an active life-destroying poison to them and in this way, too, A-II life forms accelerated their silent victory.

7) Since the energy required to change carbon dioxide and water to food is extraordinarily high by A-I standards, the reconversion of food to carbon dioxide and water liberates an extraordinarily high level of energy. This means that A-II life forms had much more energy at their command than did the A-I life forms. This was especially true of the A-II animals who could make use of the food supply of many plants at once.

When did A-II organisms start pouring oxygen into the atmosphere?

We can't tell. Photosynthesis may have developed quite early on but may have remained very inefficient for many millions of years, and its production of oxygen may have been very, very slow. A-II organisms may have barely struggled along in the shadow of more successful A-I organisms for a long time.

When did photosynthesis become efficient enough and the oxygen supply of the atmosphere high enough to mark the completion of the silent vicory of A-II?

My guess is about 700 million years ago. There must have been a time when photosynthetic efficiency rose so high that there was an explosion of evolutionary energy, and it is about 600 million years ago, quite suddenly, that complex life forms began to be present in such quantities as to begin to leave copious fossil traces. By then we began to have A-III organisms, well above the A-I and A-II organisms in complexity.

And when was the changeover to A-III complete?

My guess is 400 million years ago. By that time, although life had

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existed for over three billion years, the dry land had not yet been colonized. In an earlier article ("Triumph of the Moon," June 1973) I suggested that the dry land was not colonized until after Earth had captured the Moon and had been subjected to tidal effects. That might be so, but I must admit a more likely explanation of the delay in the colonization of the land now occurs to me, and one that I have not seen advanced elsewhere.

After all, while ultraviolet bathes the surface of the Earth, any attempt on the part of life to emerge on dry land would mean steady exposure to ultraviolet without the easy escape hatch equivalent to the oceanic device of sinking a bit deeper in the water. It was only after the ozone curtain was closed that the dry land became safe for life, and it was 400 million years ago that life began to scramble ashore.

Now, then, what if anything happens to that dreadfully thin and, perhaps, fragile ozone layer?

The changes made possible by the closing of the ozone curtain would be reversed. Once again, the Sun's ultraviolet would flood the face of the Earth so that the planet's land surface together with the topmost skin of the ocean would become as inimical to life as it had been more than 400 million years ago. What's more, the photolysis of water molecules would begin again.

Need we panic, however? After all, even if photolysis begins again, it would take billions of years to exhaust the ocean. And land life today is not what it was 400 million years ago. Animals have skin, scales, hair, feathers, all of which block off ultraviolet and prevent instant damage to internal organs.

Then, too, advanced animals can seek the shade and the most advanced animal, Homo sapiens, can use umbrellas, build glass barriers, move further poleward and so on. Even the complete opening of the ozone curtain might not serve to damage, seriously, the advanced life-forms on Earth, or to do more than inconvenience, perhaps, humanity in general.

It would increase the incidence of human skin cancer, especially among the light-skinned, if we didn't take precautions, and it might accelerate the mutation rate, particularly among plants, with unpredictable results, but what else?

Well, not all land life forms are advanced beyond their beginnings. There are still protozoa, algae, bacteria and viruses who have no particular protection against ultraviolet and have no behavioral patterns that would

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help them escape it. If the ozone curtain is ripped open, it may be that land microorganisms will be seriously depleted — and we don't know what that will do to the rest of the ecological structure.

How will the death of the microorganisms affect the nature of the soil, the growth of crops, the life of animals, including man? We don't know how, but it seems to me it can scarcely do us any good, and it may just possibly represent a colossal disaster.

Is there, then, anything which endangers an ozone curtain that has remained shut for at least 400 million years. Concerning that, I will have something to say next month.

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Gary K. Wolf ("Slammer," March 1974) is a former advertising writer who has had stories in several of the sf magazines and original anthologies. His novel *Killerbowl* was recently published by Doubleday.

Doctor Rivet And Supercon Sal

by GARY K. WOLF

Two hundred and forty-six corroded metal sensing turrets swung round and focused on the robot lifting its tarnished metal grapplers to its pitted metal chest. "Me?" the robot asked, swinging its own turret through a 360 degree circle to check the other robots around it. Its aged photoelectric proximity maintainer didn't scan well in the shadowy pallor of the mine's arc lights, and so it wound up clobbering a few of its near-standing compatriots in the process.

"Yes, you," intoned the silver-suited human. Collected condensation froze on the faceplate of his breather — the planet lacked only a colossal stick running from North Pole to South to qualify as the galaxy's largest dirt-flavored popsicle — and he had to jack up his defroster a notch. Until the breather cleared and his peripheral vision returned, he swung his helmet in a guilty, blind-side-to-side arc, reminding himself over and over that there wouldn't be another human on this planet for six months, not until the mining company that owned it made its yearly visit to harvest the accumulated crop of minerals and replace the most decrepit of its mechanical miners. "Drag your rusty hulk on up here," he told the robot.

Creaking and groaning, the robot pushed its way through the other robots, ascended the rickety stairs, and teetered across the jury-rigged platform. With a crazy, wobbling, out-of-control motion, it passed the man right by and would have shuffled completely off the other side of the stage had the human not run after it and twisted its aging guidance radar back into line.

"Your designation is...?" the human asked after leading it to the edge and facing it stage front.

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"K-65," squeaked the robot pathetically.

"Well, K-65," bellowed the human loudly enough for all the robots to hear, "I want you to try one, only one, mind you, swallow of *this*." He held up a bottle for all to see. "Doctor Rivet's Materia Medica For Mechanical Men."

Taking the bottle in one palsied, shaking grappler, the robot lifted it to its oiling vent and poured down a good healthy slug. Almost instantly, rusty scales started peeling from its body, revealing bright, shiny metal beneath. The robot, barely able to move seconds before, sent an extra pair of legs telescoping to the ground and began a frenzied four-legged tap dance. Then, sending out four more legs, followed it up with a can-can routine. "I'm new, again," it shouted in a robust baritone, leaping off the stage and bunny-hopping out into the crowd. "I can stay in the mines and keep *working*." (To the dismay of practically nobody except a few parochial Catholics and Jews, robots were all given a super-charged dose of the Protestant ethic.)

"That's right," shouted Doctor Rivet over the creaks of amazement coming from the crowd. "That robot would have been on the scrap heap in six months. Now, he can go on working for years. Because he's new, again. And, my friends, you can be new again, too." He held up a bottle of elixir in each hand. "For only two grams of thoroflux, one of these bottles can be yours. That's what I said, my friends, only two grams of thoroflux. For that paltry sum, *YOU CAN BE NEW AGAIN.* Now, who's gonna be first?"

One rusting, flaking old robot inched its way to the front of the crowd. Slowly, it reached up with its rusty grapplers, punched out a code on its dented chest panel, opened a tiny hatch, and removed almost half the material from a glowing mass inside. It extended its grappler to Doctor Rivet, who took the proffered thoroflux and replaced it with a bottle of elixir.

Suddenly, grapplers were all around, exchanging thoroflux for elixer.

Doctor Rivet gave and took, as fast as he could, repeating loudly, over and over again, "Thank you, thank you. Believe me, you won't regret it. *YOU WILL BE NEW AGAIN.*"

K-65 flipped a lever, and the ship started humming.

Doctor Rivet came up out of the hold chuckling. Every con he'd ever tried — and, for that matter, every legitimate endeavor, as well — had inevitably failed, and always for the same reason. While he could coax and wheedle machines to incredible

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heights of performance, Doctor Rivet could not deal with people. Now, at last, it seemed he'd finally found a con that played to his strength and completely skirted his weakness. Why, he had a list of three thousand and eighty planets, all of which were mined exclusively by robots. He'd gotten enough thoroflux from just this one to live on a mildly grand scale for a month or more. If he could do as well everyplace else, by hitting one planet a week, he could retire in .... He couldn't do the figures in his head. He put them aside with a mental note to calculate them on the computer at his first opportunity.

He strapped himself into the co-pod. "The thoroflux is all secure down there. Let's up ship before those animated shovels analyze that stuff and find out it's nothing more than 10-weight motor oil, blueberry syrup and graphite."

"I have a comment," stated K-65.

Doctor Rivet tilted his head. "Going to give me that old 'shame on you' routine again?" He'd won K-65 in a mah-jongg game from the robot's original owner, an elderly, tea-drinking maiden lady. Try as he might, he couldn't completely purge the robot of its moralistic programming (or of its bad gaming sense. K-65 would *always* draw to an inside straight.)

"In a sense," K-65 admitted. It assumed its version of a scholarly lecturing posture, leaning far to the right, and levitating itself two feet off the floor. "I'd like to quote a statutory code which makes what you're doing both illegal and immoral. Interplanetary Statute 462, paragraph 93, subparagraph ...."

Doctor Rivet threw his hands up in the air. "Knock it off, will you. Illegal, immoral, what difference does it make. This dodge is going to turn me into a very wealthy man. That's all I care about. Now, cut the crap, and let's get out of here."

"Sir ...."

Doctor Rivet raised his fist. "One more word out of you, and I'll wire your lead thermistor to the navigational sensor and let you contemplate clouds for a week or two. Up ship."

"Yes, sir." Obediently, K-65 settled into its pod and reached out for the doppler control.

The moment it touched the control knob, a high-density ion beam swept through the ship. K-65, grounded to the instrument panel, watched passively as its left grappler melted off, its dorsal pumper withered away in a smoky cloud, and its rear end fused to the pod in a searing flash of red, orange and green.

Doctor Rivet fared consider-

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ably better. He simply passed out.

He woke up with the grandaddy of all headaches, a kind of wrinkled, whiskery croaking inside his head that rolled from side to side like a bristly cannonball.

He opened his eyes.

"He opened his eyes, Mister Weevil."

He blinked several times to adjust his eyes to the light.

"He's blinking, Mister Weevil. I think he can probably hear you, now," said a young guy with a nose that spread out all over his face and big round floppy lips that made Doctor Rivet hungry with their uncanny resemblance to pancakes.

"You hear me?" Mister Weevil's voice had a certain theatrical quality to it. Not the full-bodied timbre of the lead in *Macbeth*, but the eager anticipation of the salesman or delivery boy or next-door neighbor who happens to ring the heroine's front doorbell in a pornopic.

"I hear you," he said swinging around to face the voice.

"Good," said Weevil, sitting behind a large black desk. Weevil was wearing a set of off-white executive coveralls with *Prexy* embroidered over one pocket, and three M's over the other. It rang a bell. 3M. Multi-Metal-Mining, proud owners of the robots Doctor Rivet had planned to let finance his now-doubtful retirement.

"You been a very naughty boy," Weevil said without any of the bemused tolerance that would usually accompany such a statement. "Sticking your fingers in our cookie jar. Give me his file," he said to his aide.

The younger man dug into his shoulder bag and pulled forth a durafile. He passed it to Weevil. "Your file," Weevil indicated with a snort of distaste. He handled it only by the edges, as if it were covered with slime. "Let me read from it. 'Frederick Footman, alias Footloose Freddie, alias Freddie the Freeloader, alias Doctor Rivet. Graduated with honors, Massachusetts Institute of Robotics and Mechanical Sciences. Diploma later revoked for failure to maintain professional ethics. Arrested for altering a mechanical broom for sexual purposes. Released on probation. Arrested for contributing to the dishonesty of an automated keno parlor. Six months in the poky. Arrested for illegal possession of a digital bingo board. You got eight months in the slammer for that one. It goes on and on, Mr. Footman. Should I keep going?"

"No, don't bother," Freddie said. "I've heard it all before."

"You're a randy one, you are," Weevil said flipping the durafile back to his aide. "That mechanical

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broom thing, for instance. That one was a doozy. And the way you diddled that voting machine on Duluth. A regular pervert, ain't you."

Freddie shrugged. Actually, he far preferred women, but they were kind of hard to come by out here in the toolies, and he wasn't the handsomest guy around, and he was short besides, and he got all tongue-tied around girls, and, well, a guy just gets ... tense. "I suppose you're going to turn me over to the cops," he said more as a statement than a question.

Weevil rubbed a hand dreamily across the bridge of his nose. "Why, no, I ain't, Fred boy. Is it OK with you if I call you Fred? You can call me Bull." He gave Freddie a fluxing, droopy-lipped smile, the kind a carnivorous plant might use to loosen up its petals prior to gobbling down a fly. "You never operated out here in the boondocks, have you, Fred boy?"

Freddie shook his head.

"I didn't think so, or you never would have asked such a stupid question. You see, out here at the end of the sky, we ain't quite as formally structured as some of those established places closer to Earth. Out here, we don't call for the cops every time we collar a troublemaker. Us and the cops, we got this understanding. They let us handle our problems any way we want to. Saves us time, saves them money. Punk stick?" He picked up a box, flipped it open, and offered it to Freddie.

Freddie helped himself to a stick, lit it with his igniter and held its smoldering end under his nose.

"Don't set it on the desk," Bull cautioned, "or we all go up in smoke. This here desk is hand-carved from a lump of 3M coal. Damned inconvenient, sometimes, but worth it to a real lover of the arts like me. I had it commissioned special Hired this famous artist, whose name escapes me at the moment, to do it. A fruity bustard, he was, but my portfolio manager assures me the value of this here desk will outperform the Dow-Jones ten times over in the next five years. And it better. You could of fed half the starving urchins on Bombay with what this dude cost me." He got up and walked around the desk, revealing sooty black smudges all across the front of his coveralls. "No, Fred boy, we could hold our own trial right here, right now, find you guilty, and swing you from the rafters this afternoon. And nobody would care, not one bit. But we wouldn't do that to you. No. Even though you have been a source of irritation to us, still we ain't gonna do that to you. Instead, we are gonna forgive and forget." He tweaked Freddie's cheek. "Who says big corporations got no heart?"

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"You want something from me, don't you?"

Bull rolled his eyes skyward and shook his hands at shoulder level. "A favor. A teensy-weensy favor. You see, there's this con operator we wanna collar, bad, but the bustard's just too slick for us. Slicker than a whistle, if you know what I mean."

Freddie admitted that he had trouble envisioning exactly how slick that was, but conceded, overall, it was probably pretty slick, indeed.

"Now I know all you criminal bustards pal around together — fraternity of thieves, the criminal code, and all that. So this oughta be real easy for you. You're gonna put this bustard out of business for us. In return, you stay healthy." Bull pointed a meaty finger at Freddie's nose. "Don't get me wrong. You don't get to stick around afterwards. As soon as you've fixed it so this bustard don't bother us no more, you get outta this part of creation and you don't come back. But at least you leave with all your parts, which is more'n you'll do if you cross me. Fair enough?"

Right away, Freddie recognized this as a shining example of a task he couldn't handle. First, it required him to deal persuasively with another person, something completely outside his solely mechanistic capabilities. Secondly, he certainly had no inroads into the criminal community. The only other con operator he'd ever met had been a cherubic kid on Detroit who'd sold him a counterfeit ticket to a robotic play, the Bolt Shiny Ballet, as he recalled. He wouldn't even know how to go about contacting this con artist Weevil wanted to set him onto.

But Freddie was, above all else, a realist. To avoid unnecessary assaults on his tranquillity (and on his inordinately low threshold of pain), he was more than ready to admit to an ability to do anything, even to being able to persuade whole legions of con men to lay down their shell games and follow him on a quest for the Holy Grail. "Fair enough."

"Great. You are one realistic fellow." Bull turned to his aide. "This is one realistic fellow." He swung back to face Freddie. "Oh, one other thing. I want this bustard put out of commission .... permanent. If you know what I mean."

Freddie drew back. "You mean murdered?"

Bull's eyes popped open. "I didn't say nothing about murder." He turned to his aide. "You hear me say murder?" The aide shook his head gravely. "No, I didn't say murder. I said ... permanent. You take it the way you want it."

Murder was high on Freddie's list of activities to avoid at all costs,

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second only to talking to strangers. But he faked acquiescence, assuming he could figure out some way around it later. "Bull, old buddy, permanent you want it, permanent it shall be."

"Great. You are one realistic guy. Besides, what's to quibble about knocking off one crummy broad, anyway."

"Broad?"

"Yeah, broad. The operator. The bustard you're gonna hit. Salvation Noble. But we call her Supercon Sal."

The instant the weathered tin doors to the mine-town meeting hall swung open, the kelp miners rushed in, pushing and shoving in desperate bids to be first to reach the front row seats. Those just coming off shift, still wet with brine, slipping in the residue of their own soggy wake, hampered in their movements by the awkwardness of their hip-high galoshes, generally did no better than center aisle. The really choice, down-close seats tonight — as last night and the four nights before — went to the speediest first and second shifters, who were dry, rested and limber, all gussied up for the occasion in their finest wearing apparel, red woolen long johns covered, barely, by porous-weave coveralls, canvas shoes for fast-action traction in the dash for seating, and motorized head-cooling propeller beanies to relieve the stifling mine-town heat.

As soon as every seat was filled, the house lights dimmed.

Without introduction, without fanfare, Salvation Noble came out onto the stage. She did it so rapidly, and with such soundlessly fluid grace, that any miner who blinked might miss her entrance entirely. And, in fact, there were many here for the sixth time who would swear under oath that she didn't *walk* out at all. These men would swear that she simply *appeared.*

She wore a one-piece vinylene suit, pure white to match her shimmering hair, low-cut and clinging to highlight her tall, lean, pliant figure. A baby spotlight, positioned directly behind her, encircled her head with a glittering, diaphanous halo. She was well aware of the image she projected, had, in fact, spent weeks practicing in front of mirrors to achieve precisely the effect she sought, the thin angelic veneer ever so slightly cracked to expose the satanic core beneath.

With a sidewise glance, she searched out Festinger, her acolyte and bodyguard. It was programmed to act monkish and mumble homilies as long as everything went well. At the slightest sign of trouble — well, suffice it to say that Festinger knew three dozen ways to break a man's arms.

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Seeing the robot in position, Salvation went into her act.

"Let us pray." She bowed her head and tucked her shoulders forward. She always started her revival meetings with a prayer. It gave her a marvelous opportunity to thrust up her head, shake her long milky tresses, tuck back her shoulders, and, most of all, throw out her chest when she came to "Amen."

From the prayer, she swung into her sermon.

"There's a better life .... on the other side," she crooned arching her breasts upward. She used to conceal a subsonic generator in her halter but abandoned it when she discovered that arching, alone, produced more exciting tension than ultra high frequencies ever could.

"Yah, yah, yah," shouted one of the miners. "I believe, Miss Salvation, *I believe*!" Festinger turned a sensor in the miner's direction, got a reading indicating the presence of intense religious fervor — not all of the miners came to see Salvation out of so uncomplicated a motivation as lecherous voyeurism — and returned to chanting canticles.

After a low open-armed bow in the devout miner's direction (accompanied by a spectacular revelation of cleavage for everyone else) Salvation went on with her pitch, pacing herself carefully, playing her audience the way musical virtuosos play instruments, drawing out incredible ranges of vibrant response.

With her seemingly innocuous, fundamental revivalist approach, she raised the miners to excited frenzies of lust and desire as she graphlically sketched abstract impressions of every sin she railed out against, an archangel leading a chorus of the Heavenly multitudes in a phonetic round of off-color ditties. From a long condemnation of debauchery, graphically illustrated with vivid examples, she worked into the promise of an eternal life to be spent dallying with bosomy nymphets in some nonsectarian composite of Heaven, Nirvana, Olympus, Zion, the Happy Hunting Ground, and Beulah Land.

After a particularly frenetic hip-thrusting imploration to repent, climaxed (and, at this point, for several miners in the back row, their kelp netting piled over their laps, that term could be applied quite literallly) by a pelvis-swinging bump and grind to work out the Devil, she brought her arms forward, incidentally pushing her breasts up and out, and pleaded for the miners' souls.

Then came the moment the miners had all been waiting for. With a swaying hip-thrusting motion, Salvation passed among

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them and took up the collection.

Rubbing her pinched and bruised buttocks, Salvation stored huge stacks of money in her bulkhead safe.

She inventoried her stock, noting she was completely sold out of medallions. A complete set consisted of one hundred and thirty silver-plated tin disks illustrating impressionistic scenes from the lives of the Christian saints or the Hebrew prophets or the Greek gods or any other group that Salvation thought might be an especially big seller. She sold the medallions either as a set or singly, depending on what the traffic would bear. They were a very high profit item. She averaged a tener apiece for them, and they cost her, in bulk, less than one one-hundredth of that to manufacture. That — together with the collections, the book sales (Bibles, Korans, Talmuds, Mandalas, Bhagavad-Gitas, and Tibetan Books of the Dead), the blessed relics (a fingernail or toenail clipping of Saint Matthew's, Buddha's, Zoroaster's, Rabbi Harry Speigelman's, Chief Howling Elk's, et cetera, et cetera — another high profit item since her own extremeties conveniently generated an almost unlimited supply) and, when the hard-core religious goings got slim, her sundry excursions into related activities — bake sales, ice-cream socials and bingo games — all that gave her a comfortably substantial income.

She went topside and asked Festinger if the ship was ready to leave.

It told her yes in a convincing, melodic voice. Hopefully, it knew what it was talking about, although Sal wouldn't bet on it. Machines habitually seemed to fizzle out on her at crucial moments. Worse yet, she was absolutely helpless when it came to fixing them.

Luckily, Festinger's record had, thus far, been above average. She'd bought it second-hand from a small tavern on Trenton, where it had been used as a juke box, and had it reprogrammed. It had operated satisfactorily ever since. Of course, sometimes, on foggy planets, the moisture got into its circuitry, and it refused to synthesize organ music unless she put a coin in its lubrication slot, but as far as Salvation was concerned, occasional lapses like that could be excused. She was far more concerned with the ever-lurking, catastrophic, plan-shattering type of mechanical malfunction that so regularly plagued her, a type Festinger seemed mercifully above. But her dark untrusting doubt still remained.

"Good. Let's get out of here," she told her robot.

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Festinger chorded the control panel, touched the field generator, and reached for the crystal activation lever. Just at that instant, a powerful ion beam passed through the ship.

Grounded, Festinger watched helpless as its anterior sensor flashed into powder, its program of All The World's Greatest Gospel Hits melted to sludge, and its rear end, completely covered with bas-relief religious sculpture, fused to the control pod.

Salvation fared considerably better. She simply passed out.

She awoke to the sight of grimy off-white executive coveralls sheathing a pair of pacing legs. She raised her head to bring the top of the coveralls into view. "Congratulations, Warner," she said to the president of 3M. "You finally got me."

"I guess I did, Sal," Bull nee Warner Weevil said in response. "I'm glad you're awake. I was starting to worry. The tracker what collared you accidently jacked up the force of its ion charge a smidgen or two above human tolerance levels. I was worried that you might not make it."

"And you'd have the VC on your neck for murder." The Volunteer Crimefighters.

"Well, that too," said Bull with exaggerated nonchalance. "Actually, I was more worried about you, yourself. I wouldn't wanna be the cause of nobody getting hurt."

"Liar. Let's just skip all the amenities, huh. Turn me over to the volunteers and be done with it."

Bull raised his eyebrows and rubbed his mouth with his hand. "Turn you over to the Volunteers," he said as if it were the first time he'd realized he had any such alternative open to him. "Where you'll get a fine, do a stretch in one of them progressive playpens that pass for slammers nowadays, and be back bugging us six months from now. No, I don't think so. Not this time. This time, I'm gonna try something different. I'm gonna use psychology on you. You oughta understand that. What is it you got your doctorate in? Interpersonal domination?"

"That was my minor," Sal answered flatly. "I majored in behavioral science."

A look of complete bafflement crinkled Weevil's brow. "Yah. I took more of the practical stuff, myself. Money manip, wheeler-dealership and fizz ed. Anyways, so with a background like you got, you oughta understand the theory behind this what I'm gonna tell you just fine. I'm not gonna punish you. In fact, so long as you don't disrupt my production schedules, or steal directly from 3M herself, I'm gonna let you keep on running your dodge

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with my blessings."

Sal found that very hard to believe.

"However," Bull continued, "as any of them high-priced shrinks would tell you, psychologically, you're now in my debt. In other words, you owe me. And you're gonna pay off. Or you're gonna get hurt a little bit."

Sal didn't find *that* hard to believe, at all. "What do you want? Sex?"

Bull looked hurt. "Sal, what kind of an opportunistic creep do you take me for. To get one up on a lady and then take advantage of her. Perish the thought. Besides, if my stockholders ever found out I screwed some bimbo ... no offense ... I'd wind up with a king-size boot in the ass. Actually, what I got in mind oughta be ruck-duck soup for somebody as good at handling people as you are. There's this operator. A bumbling, inept, small-time crook. A simpleton, but he's been fouling up our mechanicals pretty bad. It don't do me no good to get the VC involved. He'd just be right back at us in a coupla months. Besides, knowing those VC bustards, pardon my French, they'd probably find some excuse to investigate 3M while they hunt down this schlemiel." The Earth-based Crimefighters Commission reimbursed its out-world volunteer operatives according to a point system based on the magnitude of the crimes they were able to uncover and/or prevent and/or bring someone to trial for. Most of the Volunteers only fought crime part-time to pick up extra spending money. As a result, because of the point differential, they concentrated mainly on big lawbreakers rather than small ones. In that context, large companies became one of their favorite targets. Uncovering a shady deal in a corporation usually always made for a quick, easy, and massive accumulation of points. "So I gotta handle him myself. But if I use my own boys and the word gets back to the Volunteers, well ...." He spread his hands fatalistically. "I gotta stay clean. That's why I'm forced to offer you this golden deal. I let you work your racket in 3M towns; you take this dude out of commission for me."

"You mean murder him."

Warner shrugged his shoulders noncommittally. "Any way you want it." His attitude, though, indicated that murder was precisely what he had in mind.

Sal far preferred rational discussion or surreptitous persuasion to murder. Murder seemed such a purely mechanical solution to a problem, and she liked to think of herself as having progressed beyond the mere mechanical to a stage of creative innovation. But,

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apparently, Weevil was still fixated at the more primitive level. So, to give herself some time in which to formulate a novelly viable strategy, she decided, for the present at least, her best course of action was to humor him. "What's his name?"

Warner turned to his aide. "What's that crummy schmuck's name?"

His aide consulted a duraflex file and read off the crummy schmuck's name. "Frederick Footman."

While Freddie waited for the waitress to bring him his hot fudge sundae, he amused himself by manipulating free program access from his booth's coin-operated television terminal. When he had it working properly (or not working properly depending on your point of view), he punched up three selection numbers at random. The screen flickered to life showing a withered and white-haired old man, stoop-shouldered yet dignified, carrying a black bag, trudging through immense snowdrifts to reach a ramshackle coop wherin lived a destitute charwoman and her sixteen illegitimate children, each and every one stricken ill with the plague. Sacharin music built up and over the title shot, "The Goodhearted Doctor O'Levitz."

Freddie flipped it off. Overcoming the technical challenge of sapping the terminal had interested him. The program itself didn't. He knew he could punch up numbers idenfinitely, and every program would be basically the same, a synthesized rendition of the kind of pappy tear-jerker typical of 1960, the Earth era this particular city represented.

Never much of a history buff, Freddie generally avoided Hollywood with its temporally authentic 1900- and 200-era cities, painstakingly constructed over the years by lavishly budgeted moviemakers intent on reproducing in minutest detail the characteristics of bygone eras. Unlike the nostalgic tourists who flocked here in droves, Freddie was only bored by the primitive technologies and simplistic pastimes Hollywood had to offer. He far preferred the entertainments of his own day and age — the automated red-light districts of Paris, for instance, or the machine shops of Detroit.

But, according to Weevil, Salvation Noble had an insatiable craving for ice-cream sodas and, hence, hung out here on Hollywood, in 1960, where every third block held an ice-cream parlor. Freddie had been visiting them, one after another, going into and out of a seemingly never-ending succession, hoping to run into her. Thus far, though, he hand't had much luck, and he'd gained several pounds and

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picked up a chronic belch from all the ice cream he'd consumed, besides.

The waitress brought him his sundae. He'd never had one before and had ordered it as a change of pace from what was becoming a tiresome succession of ice-cream conicals. "What's that round red thing on top there?" he asked.

"That's a crab apple, sir," the waitress told him. "Our researchers tell us hot fudge sundaes always came topped with a crab apple. Here at Howie HoJo's we pride ourselves on being completely authentic." She jiggled her breasts to demonstrate exactly how far that authenticity permeated.

Freddie fumbled for a response. He realized the waitress was making a covert overture, but he didn't have the romantic expertise to respond. Actually, he would have been better able to react had she been a mechanical effigy. He knew how to seduce an eff. Fidget around with its morality codes, and you'd wind up with a diddle to curl your hair (literally — on an eff, the only opening large enough to be used for immoral purposes was the 10-volt DC charging socket.)

Stumbling all over his own words, he mumbled a curt "That's nice," and fell to eating his sundae.

"Yeah, sure, don't mention it, bub," huffed the waitress peevishly, swinging back to the counter.

He knew he wasn't unattractive to women. Short, yes, barely over five feet six, with the very average nowadays being well over a foot more. But his sandy-brown hair, long and curly, his even white teeth and dark-brown eyes, his clear complexion and delicate features gave him a certain boyish charm that a lot of women found irresistible. He got more than his share of lightly veiled propositions, but — call it shyness, call it a lack of *savoir-faire* — he never knew quite how to respond. So, he usually wound up relying on machines for his sexual pleasures. The preludes were far less traumatic than approaching real live females.

He was just finishing his sundae and contemplating following it up with a soda when he realized that all conversation in the parlor had stopped. Glancing toward the door, he saw why. The most gorgeous girl he'd ever seen had just walked in.

She was tall, taller even than most men, and that gave her nearly 18 inches up on Freddie. She was wearing a crossed sparkle-band halter and formfitting leggings, deep-red, the exact color of her hair. Her boots were fitted with special petite hydraulics to raise and lower her height depending on the impression she wanted to make. Right now, those hydraulics were all the way up.

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She looked around the parlor, which was about half filled with vacationing tourists. Even though there were several empty tables, she came over to the one Freddie occupied. "Mind if I join you?" she asked.

Freddie swallowed hard. To all indications, this girl was Supercon Sal. For weeks, he'd dreaded the moment when he would be forced to go about finding some way to make her acquaintance, and now, by sheerest coincidence, here she was asking to join him, instead!

Weakly, Freddie nodded. With a graceful fluid motion, Sal slipped into the chair beside him, brushing her thigh against his as she pulled herself closer to the table.

Freddie blushed. He raised his hand to cover his bright-crimson forehead.

Sal grasped it gently and pulled it away. "Don't be ashamed," she whispered throatily. "Bashful boys intrigue me."

The waitress came over. "Something for you, lady?"

"I'll have an ice-cream soda," Sal responded without taking her eyes off Freddie. "What flavors are there?"

"The usual," said the waitress. "Bourbon, Scotch, rye. All authentic."

"Bring me a Scotch soda, then, will you?"

"One Scotch soda, coming up," repeated the waitress with an envious glance at Sal's firmly muscled stomach and well-formed breasts.

"I hope you won't think me overly forward," sighed Sal, covering Freddie's hands with her own, "but from the moment I came in, I just couldn't take my eyes off you. I find you extremely attractive and virile."

Freddie felt his neck starting to sweat. He opened the snap closure at the collar of his blue denim jumpsuit, but it didn't seem to help. He kept getting warmer. A malfunction in the parlor's heating system, he assumed, earnestly wishing he were down underground setting it right, tracing corroded wires, replacing brittle tubing, instead of being up here, straining for something to say. "Gee," he said.

Sal pulled out a punk stick and waited for Freddie to light it. But Freddie couldn't find his igniter, and so Sal passed him hers. He lit her stick, pulled out a small screwdriver, made several adjustments to her igniter, flicked it until it worked to his satisfaction, and passed it back.

"I work for the movies," said Sal. She tossed down her soda and signaled for another. "In a dialogue department. I'm a buzzworder. I research and authenticate the snappy catchwords that were

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prevalent in various eras. Remember when 'criminys' caught on a year or two ago? I was the one who discovered it. I uncovered 'ruck-duck soup,' too, and 'ain't that a kick in the knee,' and that French term, 'bustard,' and a whole lot of others."

"Gee," twaddled Freddie.

"I love the strong, silent type," cooed Sal snuggling up to him. "What do you say we get out of here, go back to my place, and ... relax. Have a few sodas." She picked up both their checks and led him toward the door. "By the way," she said as they stepped over a plaster bum propped for temporal authenticity outside the door. "My name's Annie Suckle, but my friends call me Honey. I hope you'll be one of my friends."

"Pleased to meet you, Honey," said Freddie in his best retort of the day. "I'm Reggie Sincere."

For temporal charm, the agglutinator in Sal's kitchen was patterned to resemble an old-style refrigerator. The meal request buttons were located in a top compartment, cast in clear resin in the shape of ice cubes. The food itself materialized in a larger compartment down below, inside a tray labeled "Leafy Things."

Grimacing, Sal opened the top compartment and studied the code key inside, but, as usual, couldn't make sense out of it. If only Footman hadn't turned out to be such a dawdler, compulsively stopping the way he did to adjust the timing of every traffic light between here and the ice-cream parlor. Sal's coyest blandishments weren't able to hasten his corner-by-corner progression a whit. He'd taken so long getting here that by the time they finally arrived it was well into the dinner hour, and Sal, to allay any possible suspicions, was forced to offer to prepare something for them, for Sal an anxiety-laden experience because it required her to confront a machine.

Giving up on the code key, she punched the ice cube labeled "Verbal assist."

"Yes," said the agglutinator, speaking through an outside spigot through which it normally dispensed reconstituted soup.

"I need help preparing tonight's meal," said Sal.

"Of course," the agglutinator answered, rather pompously, thought Sal. Did it have to be so uppity just because it cooked better than she did? Why, if it thinks it's so smart, let it try and program a Pavlovian response into a newt sometime. Now *there's* a job that takes talent. Sal still glowed at the memory of her first success. "Had you anything special in mind?" the agglutinator said, interrupting her fond recollection.

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Sal wondered when it would go haywire on her. "You select for me."

"Certainly." The ag's voice dropped an octave to a fatherly baritone level. They loved being asked for advice. "Something temporally authentic, perhaps?"

Everything was working too smoothly. When the screw-up came, it would be a doozy, bet your life. "Fine."

The agglutinator rattled and hissed. Something clucked into its delivery tray.

"Oh, I forgot," Sal mumbled apologetically. "Dinner for two, tonight."

"Please think of that a trifle earlier, in the future," chastised the agglutinator in a shrill tenor. "I get a special discount on raw materials if I order in quantity."

After another hiss and rattle, the delivery tray clucked again.

Sal jerked the tray open and removed two cold, hard metallic objects. "What are these?" she asked turning them over in her hands.

"A 1960 staple, the TV dinner," responded the agglutinator with a distinctly know-it-all tone (especially hard to synthesize when speaking through a soup spigot.)

"Well, how the hell am I supposed to eat them?"

"How should I know," barked the agglutinator. "I only synthesize the stuff, I don't feed it to you, too. And don't use profanity in my kitchen."

Sal hefted the TV dinner, experimentally estimating how much damage she could do to the agglutinator with it, when a vision of Footman, juggling traffic light parts, rapture written all over his face, flashed to mind. The guy was apparently a nut on machines. Why not take advantage of it? Play the helpless weaker sex bit. Let him be glorious provider, sallying forth into the mechanical jungle to forage for food. It would soften him up for the kill.

"Reggie," wailed Sal.

"Yes," said Freddie poking his head into the kitchen.

"Reggie, this machine is screwing up our whole dinner. Can you do something with it?"

Freddie's eyes went slightly glazy. He didn't even bother to answer, merely went to the agglutinator, pulling out his pocket-size tool kit on the way.

Wringing her hands and widening her eyes in a marvelous show of total dependency, Sal watched him twist screws and worry dials into new positions for a while.

Then, leaving him to his work, Sal went into the dining room and mixed herself a soda, pouring the ingredients and shaking them herself, rather than using the drinks-o-mixer.

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She was on her third when Freddie came out of the kitchen carrying two steaming plates of food.

"We've got Salisbury steak and mashed potatoes. And for a change of pace, I programmed in some ethnicism, so we also have a side of collards and greens."

He brought the food into the living room and set it down before her on the coffee table, a cantilevered construction fabricated from the roof of a 1960 Chevrolet hardtop.

They ate in silence. Every time Sal tried to strike up a conversation, Freddie would gag on his food and drool. A casebook study, a man using the precision of mechanics to compensate for having a puny animus. At first opportunity, she would have to work it up for one of the journals. Out of understanding sympathy, Sal let him finish his dinner in peace.

After the dishes had been disposed of, Freddie said, "Soda?"

Sal nodded.

Freddie bounded out of his sling-back chair and fairly attacked the drinks-o-mixer, a whirlwind of screwdrivers and wrenches, twisting and turning. With a gleeful smile, he produced two frosty soda glasses brim full of a frothy greenish cream. "Two Scotch sodas," he announced triumphantly.

Sal tasted hers. It was easily the best she'd ever had.

She gave him a radiant smile intended to both acknowledge his mechanical prowess and set him at ease. While he concentrated his total attention on draining his glass, Sal studied him. Her own tastes ran more to rugged, gutsy musclemen, and yet she could see how he might be classed as good-looking in a boyish defenseless way. She knew the type well. Inner-directed, shy. As a child, probably a nipple biter, what the textbooks referred to as suffering from an edible complex. A pushover for a strong-willed woman. She almost regretted her victory would come so easily, would give her none of the mental jousting and thrill of conquest by force that she loved.

She slipped her hand into her pocketbook and grabbed the pistol Bull Weevil had supplied her, a Mark IV Bloody Awful. She started to pull it out, intending to use its phallic significance to cow Footman into abrupt submission to her gritty resolve, when a burst of music and a clash of cymbals from the street below caused Freddie to jump up and run to the balcony. With him out there, in full view of anyone walking along the sidewalk, use of the Bloody Awful was, temporarily, out of the question. Reluctantly, she slipped it back into her purse.

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"Honey, come quick. It's a parade," Freddie bubbled enthusiastically, motioning her over.

She joined him on the balcony.

The parade was one that ran nightly through the streets of 1960. It featured typical characters of the era.

As Sal reached the balcony, the unit passing below was a drill team composed of middle-aged ladies dressed in expensive but dowdy clothing. Each lady carried a mechanical poodle under her arm. At a signal from the drill master the ladies dropped the poodles to the ground and gazed nonchalantly off into space while the dogs ran in circles, sniffing the ground, finally depositing small brown lumps smack in the middle of the sidewalk. There was a big rush among the spectators to pick up the lumps, each of which, when opened, contained a Tootsie Roll.

The unit drew a big hand as it marched off.

"Look, muggers!" exclaimed Freddie excitedly, pointing at the next unit. A motley group of men paraded by, accosting the spectators with plastic knives and wooden pistols. On cue, a phalanx of white knights, resplendent in formfitting armor, all astride gleaming white mechanical horses, galloped up and ZAPPED the muggers with glowing lances.

The crowd guffawed lustily.

Dealing with Footman could wait. Sal found herself enjoying the parade. The next unit was a band comprised of finely coiffured, heavily rouged and powdered men, mincing down the street under the leadership of a man swishing along backwards, directing them with a cigarette in a long ivory holder. "Look, Reggie, a pansy band." She turned to him, but he was gone.

"Reggie?" she called ducking inside.

"Right here," Freddie said stepping out from behind the window curtains. In his hand he held a Bloody Awful. For a moment, Sal assumed he'd gone through her purse, but then she noticed his pistol was blue, while hers was red.

"Sal," he said, "I don't want to have to kill you."

She dove for her purse, grabbed the pistol, and somersaulted up to face him, half expecting him to shoot her before she made it to her feet.

But he didn't shoot.

And she didn't, either.

They'd reached an impasse. Neither had the heartless determination necessary to shoot the other. Neither could think of anything to say. So they both just stood there, pointing their guns at each other. At least Sal had the presence of mind to sneer every once in a while to assert her claim

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to domination. Freddie simply looked sheepish.

Then, abruptly, Sal realized that Footman had called her by name, by her *real* name, Sal. He wasn't supposed to know that. "Warner Weevil," she muttered through clenched teeth. "That dirty bustard."

"Hey, what a coincidence," Freddie gasped in astonishment. "I know a guy named Weevil." Then he, too, saw the light. "He set us up."

"You're darn right he did. But how did he expect to get rid of us both? What if only one of us got shot?"

Crash! A VC thumping machine smashed in the door and skittered back into the hall. Three persons, all obviously just having finished taking part in the parade, bounded into the room, vaulting over the door's remains.

"VC" barked the first, in mugger garb, pointing a decidedly unwooden pistol at them. "Up with your armth," lisped the second, keeping them covered with a gun concealed inside his flute. "Where's the stiff?" asked the third, a matron, gesturing meanacingly with the rear end of her poodle.

Passing a resigned flicker of understanding between them, Freddie and Sal dropped their pistols and held out their hands for the cuffs.

A man in a period movie usher's garb, a garish red and blue fourragered blazer with ROXY on the back, wearing a VC patch on one shoulder and VC sergeant's stripes on the other, led Sal and Freddie out of their cells, down a long corridor, and into an interrogation room. He flashed them a quick, insincere smile. "Plenty of seating, right down front, there under the two spotlights," he crooned pointing with a .38-caliber flashlight. "But before we start the grilling, let's pause for a few words from those nice folks down at the Roxy Theater. On those long afternoons when you find yourself between capers, why not take in a Roxy matinee, featuring only the finest period projections. Matinee showtimes at 12 noon, 2 and 4. Come early and avoid the lines. Any questions?"

There were none.

The usher handed each a slip of paper. "These coupons are good for half-off an authentic bag of popwheat. I won't give you this week's program because, frankly, I doubt you'll be out of here much before next year. But hang onto your coupons. They never expire."

He left them alone.

Sal started to say something, but Freddie shushed her. Running his hands across the wall, he uncovered three hidden micro-

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phones and an optical transmission device, all the size of a large fly. He crunched them, one by one, under his heel.

The door popped open. "That wasn't nice. The good Lord doesn't grow those things on trees, you know," said a priest displaying a VC patch and Lieutenant's bars on his cassock. From his neck hung a cross on which bas-relief letters spelled out Crimefighter (on the upright) and Volunteer (on the horizontal). "Allow me to introduce myself. Lieutenant Father Goulash." He assumed a saintly expression of deep anguish. "Before we go any further, let me clarify one point. I'm a man of the cloth first, a Crimefighter second. I suffer through the rubber hosings, the grillings, the fiendish tortures, forcing confessions out of nubile young women by searing their pink, quivering flesh with punk sticks ...." His voice scaled higher; a slight trace of spittle appeared at the corner of his mouth. "Inflicting unimaginable indignities on reluctant witnesses, flailing the skin, smelling the blood ...." He stared at them blankly. "What was the point I was trying to make? Oh, yes, I remember." His composure returned. "I suffer through all these perversions only for the sake of my calling. I regard my crime-fighting work as a logical adjunct to my ministerial duties, a way, so to speak, to flush out souls in need of saving, lead them back to the paths of righteousness. Plus, the point money helps out. Keeps me well-supplied with fishes and loaves. Of course, I donate fully one one-hundredth of it to the Church. But don't let my gentle generosity lull you into a state of false security. I'm a mean son of a gun where the Devil's concerned. Which brings me to you two. You two are causing me no end of moral grief. I just know you're up to something Devilish, something I could be saving you from. I got a tip. 'Padre,' said this stoolie — he called me Padre because I'm like a father to all these miserable scum — 'Padre,' he said, 'you get some VC over to this apartment, and you'll find yourself a stiff.' Then he gave me your address, Miss Noble. So, I sent my men over, fully expecting them to uncover a murder. I get 200 points for uncovering a murder, Heaven forbid. But when they get there, do they uncover a murder? They do not. They find you two perfectly alive. So, poof, my 200 points vanishes. But I say to myself, 'Big Fisherman' — I always like to think of myself as a netter in the tainted sea of life — 'Big Fisherman, let's take whatever crumbs should fall our way and be thankful.' I told my men to haul you in on a pistol possession charge. I get, let me see

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...." He pulled out a tiny red book. "Yes. 16 points for a conviction on that one. 16 points and a bonus. My choice of a weekend on Las Vegas or a pen set. But, unfortunately, I can't make pistol possession stick."

"You can't?" asked Sal, reluctant to press her luck, but curious nonetheless.

"No, I can't, you smug little lawbender, you. To get you on pistol possession, I had to catch you with a pistol. Bombs don't count. In a way, it's too bad you didn't trigger one of those phony Bloody Awfuls by accident. Ka-blooey! No more anything for twenty feet in any direction. I get 2 points for uncovering suicides. Not much, but it all adds up. Would you believe I've looked, and I've looked, but there's just no law against building bombs, as long as you do it in the privacy of your own abode in the company of consenting adults. It's what we crime-fighters regard as a jurisprudential hindrance to the halting of crime. So, I'm going to have to let you go. But, first, because we're all part of the same big happy family of man, and siblings would never snitch, how about, just between the three of us, you tell me which one of Hollywood's commandments you were planning to rend asunder with those two phony pistols."

Freddie and Sal were staring at each other.

"Not going to talk, huh? Too bad. I guess that's my tough luck. I can't force you to talk if you don't want to." His tone softened. "That's is as far as I, Lieutenant Father Goulash the Crimefighter, am concerned. You don't want to talk, you don't have to." He turned his back on them, then spun around to face them again. "But, as Lieutenant Father Goulash, your father confessor, I can't, in all good conscience, let you walk away from here burdened with the terrible secret I know, even now, eats away at your souls." He put a paternal hand on each of their shoulders. "Let me tell you about repressed guilt, corking it up inside, internal seething, and the like. I see a lot of that in my work, and it's not good, no siree. You've got to release all that guilt, unburden yourself of it, or you'll wind up in terrible shape. Why, I could point out 12 duodenal ulcers in the 14 cells in Cell Block 1, alone. And every one of those ulcers was caused by bottled-up guilt." He dropped his hands and gazed off into space as if deep in contemplation. "Tell you what. If you'd like to spare yourself all that misery, let it out, bare your souls to God, I have a confessional set up in an empty cell in Block 3. You have my word nothing I hear there will be used against you." They noticed he had his fingers crossed behind his back. They shook their heads.

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"Well, then, I'm forced to let you go. But don't get careless." Apparently, somewhere in the last two sentences, he'd slithered back into his crimefighter's guise. "I'm going to keep my eyes on you. Step out of line, and you'll both be breaking big rocks into little rocks on Leavenworth. Now get out of here."

They turned to go.

"Oh, and one final word," said Lieutenant Father Goulash. "The Lord be with you."

Out of jail, Sal and Freddie headed straight for the nearest bar. A place called Harry's, it catered to a low-class clientele. That and its location, far off the beaten tourist paths, resulted in its being run with a complete disregard for temporal authenticity, a good thing, since Lieutenant Father Goulash had neglected to return their money (muttering something about fishes and loaves and it's being more blessed to give than to receive when they'd pointed out his oversight).

Using odds and ends from the mounds of switches and thermos he carried with him, Freddie fabricated a pencil-sized flashlight that beamed a peculiar pale-yellow light. Wielding it like a scalpel, he approached the bartender.

"What'll it be, mac?" asked the contemporary bartender in a tinny tenor, one snaky sponge-tipped tentacle swabbing the bar while another tentacle, this one capped with a grimy rag, wiped it dry.

Freddie poked the light into one of the bartender's sensing pickups and started flipping it on and off in intricate patterns.

"Let's not have any trouble, mac," warned the bartender, pulling a cosh-ended tentacle out from under the bar.

Confidently ignoring the threat, Freddie kept flashing.

The bartender swung the cosh.

Ducking, Freddie adjusted his flash pattern. This time, it brought results.

"Let me set up a free one for you and your friend," said the bartender, docilely stowing his cosh. "What'll it be?"

A double zingy in each hand, Sal and Freddie slipped into a corner cube. Freddie jimmied the coin box, and a hush cone's hazy blue glow flared up around them.

The two of them sat in silence, Sal sipping at her drink, staring off someplace over Freddie's head, Freddie grinning inanely, trying to play at being suave. Here he was, having a friendly intimate drink with a beautiful girl, and he couldn't think of anything to say. Briefly, long ago, he had given in to his pumping libido enough to temporarily abandon his pervasive fascination with mechanical journals for reading material of a more

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carnal nature, a succession of graphically illustrated pseudoscientific publications bearing titles like *The Lover's Guidebook, Success with the Single Girl,* or, more prosaically, *Making It with Broads.* The advice contained in those publications, admittedly subordinated to the pictures, had never worked very well for him. Yet, lacking any better guidance, he always fell back on it whenever he found himself situationally obligated to address a member of the opposite sex, all the while cursing the quirk of nature that had neglected to make human females operate according to the same predictable physical laws that regulated light, heat and sound. The books' general consensus advised breaking the ice with a casual flattering observation on some aspect of a girl's person. So, without dropping his grin, he verbalized the first observation that came to mind. "You know, you've really got a swell pair of boobies, there,"

Sal tossed down both her zingys and picked up one of Freddie's before responding . "Why? Why would Warner Weevil go through all that trouble just to get rid of *us*?"

Far sooner than he would have preferred, Freddie decided the conversation had become more than he could hold up one end of. He settled back against a cushion, wrinkled up his brow in a fair impression of groaning introspection, and sipped at his drink, leaving the motivational analysis of Warner Weevil's activities to Sal. From time to time, he made himself useful by hitting up the bartender for more free drinks.

After eight zingys (Freddie, with three under his belt, could barely sit up straight), Sal put it all together. "Close!" She spat. "Getting too damned close."

Assuming she was referring to their newly established relationship, Freddie eased his way around to the other side of the cube.

"What's the matter, I scare you, little man?" Sal got up to leave.

"No, it's just that I thought that by 'close' you meant we were, uh, getting too *close.*"

"You're a funny snake, you know that?" Sal chucked Freddie under the chin. "Someday, when we've got a few spare minutes, I'll sit you down for a psychological tune-up. Your self-assurance definitely needs work. And your small-group dynamic. Oh, brother, are you deficient there. I may even design a whole new therapeutic methodology around your case. By 'close' I meant the VC was getting too close to something Weevil didn't want them stumbling into. There's been a rumor going around for some time now that he's heavily

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involved in the drug traffic on Washington, for instance. So, when we turned up working his planets, he got panicky. If the VC ever arrested us for bunko, they might sneak a peek into his dealings on the way past, and he didn't want them doing that. So, he had to get rid of us before the VC caught up to us.

Freddie blushed. "I'm ashamed to admit to this, but I didn't even know there was such an organization as the VC before they came busting in and arrested us."

Sal patted his arm. "We all have to start someplace." Using a breadstick, she sketched an elaborate diagram through the zingy suds on the table top. "Here's Weevil." She put down a bubbly circle. "He couldn't finish us off himself because the VC might have gotten him that way, too. So, he set us onto each other." She leaned over the diagram, marked a big X on it, and pointed to Freddie. "I know what you're going to ask."

"What?" Freddie asked.

"You're going to ask why Weevil tipped the VC to our final scene."

"That's exactly what I was about to ask."

"To put himself completely out of the picture. Visualize it from the VC's viewpoint. Two con operators have a falling out and blow each other up. The VC gets some nominal point money and closes the case. Weevil's in the clear because there's nothing to tie him to us, and nobody's left to give the VC an entree into an investigation of the big drug deal Weevil's really trying to cover up. It all fits together. It's the way he'd operate. It's the only logical solution for a man like Weevil."

Freddie shook his head, honestly impressed. "Sal, you have really got a way with untangling minds. I'd have said Weevil wanted us out of the way just because he didn't like us messing around with his company — I mean, he seemed really attached to it, and all — and let it go at that."

Sal jabbed her finger at him, ready to cut him down with a few well-chosen words. But slowly, her confident grin changed to a doubtful scowl, and again, to a twitch of grudging admiration. "That's another possibility." She sank back down onto her cushion.

Then she bounded up. "No matter. Whatever he's up to, you can bet there's money in it. And if there's money in it, I'm going to be in it, too. And so are you," she added with the distinct implication that she wasn't leaving Freddie much choice in the matter.

Freddie hung back. "All this stuff is a bit out of my line. I think I'll pass on it. You go ahead without me."

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"Not on your life," sneered Sal. "If Weevil picks you up again, I don't want you blabbing that I suspect anything. From now on, wherever I go, you go."

Now *there* was a premise brimming with possibilities. "On second thought, I guess I'll tag along after all."

"Autopilot," read the fiberfoam sign in the cockpit window of the nifty two-tone green-over-grey sports job in the used ship shop. "Low light-yearage, new rad., only 1,000 clumps on overhauled blippers, exyn., A/H. No money down with your good credit."

On a test flight, Freddie judged the ship terribly underpowered and wanted to scout up something else for the flight to Washington. But Sal thought the colors had a very soothing effect (and, besides, they highlighted her eyes).

Freddie told her that was the dumbest reason he'd ever heard for picking out a ship.

Sal touched his cheek ever so lightly.

He stole the sports job that night.

Sal tossed four chips into the pot. "See your two. Raise two."

Freddie's pile of chips was half the size of hers. He regretted ever having entered a poker game with someone who seemed able to glance into his eyes and immediately divine his every bluff. At least this time, holding four kings and a ten, he had her honestly. "Your two, and two more."

"Two, and up five."

"Your five ..." He counted out his remaining chips. "... and twenty-four more."

Idly, Sal counted that many out. "Call." Smugly, Freddie laid down his hand and reached for the pot.

Sal stopped him. "Sorry, not good enough. Four queens, ace."

"Wait a minute," argued Freddie, "since when do four queens beat four kings?"

"My, my, my, aren't we being chauvinistically Victorian, today," Sal ad-libbed, raking in the chips. "You're a bit out of touch. I recommend you creep out of your shell every now and then for a peek at what's going on in the mainstream of civilization. Poker rules, for instance, as recently revised by the Interplanetary Poker Federation after consultations with scores of leading social scientists, now rank kings and queens as equal. It not only fosters a much better psychological balance in the male-female relationslhilp but also makes my ace winner over your ten." She extended her hand, grasped his and gave it a brisk shake. "Thanks for the game."

Freddie rose up, index finger extended, just as the ship's klaxon

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horn roared to life, signaling an impending collision.

Freddie reacted instantly, activating the viewplate to see a drifting life raft reflected there. He slammed in the port gyros to carry the ship around it. Plugging in the wide-band beeper, he beamed it in the raft's direction. "Do you need help?"

"No, blockhead. I'm riding around aimlessly on the solar currents to prove my theory that Earthlings reached the stars by drifting there in gigantic tin cans," came the response. "Cut the crapola and haul me in, will you?"

Guiding the skyhook with a loving, almost empathic skill, Freddie shagged the life raft going away.

Once inside the ship's pressurized cargo hold, the raft's hatch coupling automatically unsnapped and the raft popped open. Both Freddie and Sal crowded in close to help the raft's occupant out. But no one came forward to meet them. Freddie poked his head inside. Slowly, he pulled it out. "It's empty!"

"So what am I then, a soy salad sandwich," said a voice from inside.

Freddie stuck his head back in. "Who said that?"

"I did, dummy." The voice seemed to be emanating from inside a tiny kitchenette.

"My God, he's trapped in the kitchenette," Freddie gasped.

"What, trapped inside. I *am* the kitchenette," said the voice. "late of the flagship *Spirit of Sicily*, out of New Jersey. Hop to now, maties. Unbolt me, and slip those wheels over there underneath me." It shot a spray of tap water into a nearby corner. Freddie hoisted the kitchenette onto its wheels as it waxed sentimental. "I'm going to miss the good old *Sicily*, bless her soul. She started out as a government junket ship. Crew of sixteen, thirteen of them stewardesses, hand-picked, if you'll excuse the pun, for the size of their titties. Well, came this VC investigation, and, bingo! first thing you know, the *Sicily* is converted to an automated garbage scow. And that, naturally, should have meant good-bye me. Machines don't need three square num-nums a day, you know. But, leave it to the Jerseyites. The contractors get paid to pull out all us extraneous stuff and put in a shiny new centralized guidance module. So what do they do? Naturally, they buy off the inspectors, pilfer the guidance module, and automate the ship by slapping war-surplus stuff into every nook and cranny. A lousy crooked deal, all right, although, honestly, I can't complain. With me having more nooks and crannies than anyplace else, I kind of wound up as captain, pro tem."

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It jounced out of the life raft, swaying side to side in its impression of a spacefarer's swagger. "I saw that ship through many a tight spot, I did. It's my ingrained sense of mission. The garbage must go through, and all that. Well, when the *Sicily* finally gave up the ghost and started breaking apart — you can't imagine how second-hand rivets crap out when the going gets rough — I ordered a brace of servos to jerk the memory banks out of the life raft and bolt me inside. Wow, what static I got from the dormitory section. The bunks insisted it was the captain's duty to go down with the ship. Fortunately, I'm not all that traditional. It's a good thing I didn't stick around to debate it. I barely got off in time to avoid a physical confrontation with the latrine. I can see it still. Perched up on two servos, charging the life raft, yelling out, "Women and water closets first." Anyway, here I am. And by right of salvage, I'm yours. To put to work as you will. If you'd like my suggestion, I make a splendid captain. Jut-jawed. Steely eyed. Rolling the bridge. But I'm flexible. If the captain's slot is already filled, I'm willing to sign on as first mate. I do horn pipes on my teakettle. And if first mate's taken, well, I suppose there's always galley master. It doesn't have the status I've grown accustomed to, but at least it would keep me in space. As to qualifications, I whip up a terrific Spanish omelet. I even throw in chicken imitations when I synthesize the eggs." It tilted a spice rack pleadingly to one side. "Got any work to keep an old space farer busy?"

Enthralled at the prospect of having something metallic around to talk to, Freddie nodded. "I can probably scout up a few odds and ends."

The sergeant aboard the VC ship turned from the tracker. "They took it aboard, sir."

"The Lord be praised," said Lieutenant Father Goulash.

The sergeant turned to the priest. "Sir, may I make a comment."

"Of course, my son."

"Sir, if I were them, I'd be a trifle suspicious if I ran across a talking kitchenette in the middle of open space."

Lieutenant Father Goulash raised his hands in gentle absolution. "I don't think we need worry about that. Let me explain. Those two are up to something sinful, and where sin is concerned, we often get help from very unexpected sources. For instance, when I requested a mechanical infiltration device from headquarters, I was told to modify gear they already had in stock or do without. When I looked to see what

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they had, it boiled down to a choice between the kitchenette and a one-tenth scale model of Niagra Falls." The priest's face took on an angelic expression. "When confronted with momentous decisions like that, I always ask myself, 'What would the Lord do in a similar situation?' And this time, believe it or not, I could actually hear Him whispering to me. 'I would use the kitchenette.' With that divine revelation, Lieutenant Father Goulash hitched up his robe around him and clumped gracefully down the ship's ladder to the pistol range where, after squeezing off a few rounds, he would chant his vespers.

Arrows directed them from their ship across the field to a massive grey building. With the kitchenette rolling along behind them doing a muted space chantey on exhaust fan and spoons, they approached a gloomy olive-drab door stenciled with the designation *ALIEN INSPECTION AREA* and, in smaller letters underneath, *Passage through this area required of all incoming tired, poor, or otherwise physically or morally suspect aliens. This means you. Enter here and form huddled mass inside door.*

Leaving the kitchenette in the care of a square yellow contraption which would carry it through a separate but equally effecctive inspection area of its own, Freddie and Sal entered and huddled.

A stenciled sign instructed them and the ten other aliens huddling with them to remove all their clothing. Sal instantly shucked hers. Freddie, embarrassed at appearing nude in front of strangers, took his time.

A clothed official came in, removed his top hat, clicked his heels, and bowed. "Ladies and gentlemen," he projected. "My name is c.p.k. druid, government servant. Grade 12. And that's Grade 12 on a 15-grade scale, to help you place me in correct perspective. Let me take this opportunity to welcome you to Washington, Land of the Free, Home of the Brave, where democracy is king and opportunity is what you make of it. We have several teams of government medical examiners standing by to make sure you don't have anything ..." He curled his lip as if he'd just smelled something putrid. "... potentially harmful to our basic pioneer stock. If you'll follow me."

The huddle moved off, with Freddie, scrunched down elbows to groin, bringing up the rear.

Freddie's hunched-over posture while preserving his dignity, got him a C-minus rating, meaning he could mingle with the populace, but not reproduce the species.

Sal got an A-double-plus and

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several on-the-spot propositions.

Only two Venetian sour worms and a black man failed the exam completely.

They hid the kitchenette in a boarded-up snack bar and signed up for a tour of the local 3M metal refinery, according to Sal the logical hiding place for the huge consignment of drugs Weevil was said to be selling.

Their findings were far from encouraging. The tour was almost over, and they'd drawn a complete blank. Contrary to Sal's logic, there appeared to be no place in the refinery capable of concealing a vast quantity of contraband.

"And on this side ...." The guide, a crusty old man who'd been taking this tour around for nearly twenty-five years, pointed left. Freddie and Sal stared right. "I said, on *this* side ...."

They had both seen it at the same time. The heavy metal door, the time locks, the big yellow sign reading *HAZARDOUS. KEEP OUT.* Sal waved her upraised hand in a wide arc. "Yoo hoo. Guide." She gave it a wealthy debutante vibrato. "What's in there?"

The guide snapped back a testy reply. "Young lady. I am pointing out the important workings of a 3M refinery. If that particular section were important, believe me, I would point it out. But it is not, hence, I will not. Now, on *this* side ...."

Sal took his answer as a guilty evasion. "Yoo hoo, again. If it's not important, why does it have all those locks and things?"

Mortifying a sassy tourist once gave the old guide a sense of accomplishment. Having to do it twice gave him only a nervous stomach and a bout of diarrhea. Hence, out of consideration for his aging bowels, he capitulated. "All right. That is a storage depot for infroactive by-products of the refining process. It's kept locked because anyone breathing those by-products will turn perwinkle blue and remain so until the by-products are flushed from the system. The subject is quite incidental to our operation as a whole. Now, as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, on *this* side ...."

His answer came across as patently fishy. Sal went into whispered consultation with Freddie. "What do you think? Does the stuff they're refining give off infroactive by-products?"

On the one hand, Freddie knew absolutely nothing about metal refining. On the other, however, he hated to admit it. After all, beautiful girls rarely turned to him for advice. So, puffing out his chest and sucking in his cheeks to give himself the emaciated features he always associated with craggy good

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looks, he solemnly shook his head.

From a prominent, elderly, and, fortunately, lecherous architect, Sal coerced a complete set of blueprints to the refinery and the vault. After studying them, Freddie pursed his lips and groaned.

"Something wrong?" Sal put her hands on his shoulders and peered over at the blueprints on the off-chance that whatever was concerning him was so obvious that even she could recognize it.

"Everything's wrong. This place was built during the miner's rebellion of ought-six. It's put together like a fortress." He traced a line around the mill's perimeter. "A ring of pincushion sensors triggered by any moving sequential force. That means they ignore rain drops and falling leaves, but go off immediately if anything runs, hops, walks or crawls over them."

"Can't you disconnect them?"

"Only from the inside." He traced another ring, several hundred yards inside the first. "A field of scalpel beams, set to discharge at random intervals so you never know when they're coming. You get hit by one of those, and you're mincemeat."

"Can't you disconnect .... yes, I can guess. You have to get inside."

"Precisely."

"And I suppose the time locks are impenetrable, too."

Freddie shook his head. "Surprisingly not. They look like a piece of cake."

Sal held up her hand, ticked off one of her fingers. "Taking things in order then, our first concern is to knock out the defenses from inside." She threw her hands out at shoulder level. "Sounds simple. You go in with a tour group, duck loose, find a hiding place, and stay there until everybody's gone. Then you come out, knock over the defenses, and I drive in with the compactor." A large unwieldy piece of gear used to harvest grain. One end contained a high suction nozzle, the other a hydraulic press and storage compartment. They estimated they'd need two trips to collect all the drugs in a vault that size.

"Great. Except for one other item. The refinery is a completely mechanical operation. Whenever tour groups leave, the air vents fill the whole plant with a misty mixture of graphite and oil. It's great for machines, but I couldn't breath it for thirty seconds. I'd need an oxygen tank, and there's no way to smuggle in something that bulky when I'm part of a tour group."

"So hide in an incoming crate of equipment. You and your oxygen gear, both."

"They've got that covered, too. They scan every incoming box with

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a zephyr ray. And there's no way to shield from it."

Sal paced across the room, running her hand through the air. "The oxygen tank comes inside in a crate." She swung her right hand across to meet her left. "You go in with a tour group." Smack. She clapped her hands. "You get together before the air goes bad."

Freddie hung his head in defeat. "It's covered. There's a hundred meters of open aisle between the main plant and receiving. If I dash across before the tour group leaves, the guide's sure to spot me. If I wait until after, I run out of time. The air fouls in seconds. I couldn't possibly find the right box and get my gear on soon enough."

"How about flying in with a thopter and landing on the roof?"

"No good. Zone impulse tracking ack-ack."

"Tunnel in?"

"That's the hardest of all. Remember, the builders most feared an assault by miners. The place has got underground defenses to a depth of a hundred feet."

"I see what you mean." Sal mixed and poured herself a good, stiff soda. "This is quite a problem. As far as I can tell, it looks like there's no way at all for a human to get inside."

It triggered a solution so obvious, Freddie couldn't believe he'd overlooked it. "Of course. There's no way for a *human* to get inside."

As understanding swept over Sal, she nodded happily.

"Are you sure you've got it?" Freddie asked the kitchenette. "Repeat it to me again."

The kitchenette rolled around the room, ducking furtively behind chairs, sofas, and tables, playing at making itself inconspicuous. "Simple. Once I'm inside, I go to the green control box in section ED 10. I disconnect all the blue leads and shunt them into the red ones. That takes care of the sensors. Then, I go to the red control box in section HAT 14 and do the same thing, disconnect the blue, shunt them into the red. That wipes out the scalpel beams. Nothing to it." It rolled up to a mirror. "Oh, I feel so surreptitious. Do you have any burnt cork? To blacken my porcelain?"

Freddie ignored the question. "And then, after you've taken out the sensors and the scalpel beams, you .... what?"

"I go to the vault, and I wait for you two to come in."

"OK. Can you think of anything else?" Freddie asked Sal.

"You're the expert."

Freddie nearly glowed. "Then let's get going."

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The duroplas crate labeled "Better Built Bushings" clanked up the conveyor belt, past the zephyr ray station, into receiving. It shuttled down a long track, finally halted alongside a number of similar crates. After all motion had completely stopped, a tubular plug popped silently out from the top of the box and fell away to the floor. A spatula on a long flexible cable snaked out of the hole and began prying away the front of the box.

Finally, the box dropped open, and the kitchenette rolled out into the hazy refinery air.

Nothing stopped it or even seemed to notice its presence as it made straight for section ED 10.

It had no trouble finding the green control box. Using its plate scraper and vegetable tongs, it disconnected the blue leads and shunted them to the red.

From there, it went directly to section HAT 14, found the red box and opened it.

Inside, it located the blue leads.

Grinding its garbage disposal in a mechanical version of a chuckle, settling back to wait, it left the blue leads all firmly in place.

Standing at the helm, Freddie guided the compactor to the outer edge of the pincushion ring. He counted off the seconds to his preselected starting time and nodded to Sal in the passenger's seat. She stood and threw a large rubber ball into the field. If the pincushion sensors were live, the ball would activate them. But it rolled to a peaceful halt.

Time for the supreme test. Freddie torqued up the turbine and drove cautiously forward.

The pincushions crunched into powder under the compactor's weight, poofed into metallic mush, but didn't set up the high-pitched disabling whine or discharge the poison-tipped needles that they would have had they been active. The kitchenette had succeeded.

A high wire-mesh fence signaled the end of the ring, the beginning of the razor beam field. Bristling with pride and success, Freddie drove the compactor straight up against the fence, pushing at it until it toppled.

In high gear, he raced arrogantly toward the refinery.

One quarter of the way across the field, Sal felt something tickle her inner thigh. When she examined the spot, she found her leggings torn open there. She tossed Freddie an admiring smile. A caper always deliciously heightened her overall sensibilities, making her vibrantly aware of herself as Woman. "You clever rascal. How do you do that?" Perhaps she'd grossly underestimated this half pint's masculine talents.

Assuming that she was refer-

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ring, in general, to the way he handled machinery, Freddie lifted his upper lip, wrinkling his nose in a worldly-wise sneer, and tossed off a casual reply. "I've had lots of experience."

Something tickled the underside of Sal's left breast, and, once more, fabric flapped. Yes, there was no doubt she'd underestimated his talents. "I'll say you have. But do you think we have time?"

A tickle ran up Freddie's back, his suspenders snapped in two, and his pants fell off. Her mouth puckered in awe at Freddie's dexterity, Sal started to undo the zippers on her coveralls.

Unaware of opportunity knocking in the passenger's seat, vexed, making a mental note to shoplift a belt next time, Freddie reached down, fumbled his pants up around his waist, and stood. To stare straight at a clean thin slash in the windscreen, precisely at his eyes' level.

A frantic check of the compactor — slashes in a fender, a door bisected — told him the frightening truth. "The razor beams are live!"

They still had one-half of the way to go.

From four different directions, a quartet of beams cut through the compactor's side walls, severing a major wire. The compactor ground to a halt.

Aware now of what had really caused all that tricky clothing-removal business, Sal bolted to her feet.

No sooner was she upright than a lateral beam amputated the heels from her boots, tipping her over backwards. Luckily, as it turned out. Had she stayed erect, the next beam, a vertical one, would surely have sliced her in two.

"What do we do?" she wailed from the floor.

Freddie didn't answer. Hunched over the compactor's autoguidance system, he feverishly reconnected wires, prodded by his terror to such creative brilliance that at least two of his reconnections revolutionized branches of physics. "I think I've got it." He felt a tickle, reached up and found he wouldn't have to worry about keeping his cowlick slicked down anymore. "I'm picking up the energy rise that precedes a beam. With luck, I can focus and track ...." He flipped two toggles and threw a dial. A pattern of lines formed on the compactor's view screen. "That's it! The next beam should hit right ..." He hopped sideways, put his finger on the bulkhead. Magically, an invisible force put a gash right where he pointed. "... here." He studied the view screen. "Quick. Three on the way." One eye on the view screen, he grabbed Sal, pushed her into a contorted posture, waist bent, arms thrown

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out to the left, legs spread apart, to put her completely out of the way of the oncoming, crisscrossing beams. Assuming a similarly awkward pose, altered slightly to compensate for his shifted position, he fell in beside her. Three beams passed them harmlessly by. After a quick glance at the view screen, Freddie readied them for the next barrage. He sat Sal on the floor, ankles around shoulders, arms around thighs, feet at a forty-five-degree angle. Grunting, he did the same. Twelve beams surged forth, missing them completely, although outlining them in perfect detail on the floor.

Freddie dashed, once again, to the viewscreen. "Oh, no," he cried.

"Freddie, what is it?"

He gave her a fatalistic shrug. In a shower of sparks, a single beam sliced through the viewscreen.

Understanding his concern, Sal shrieked. "Freddie, do something."

Freddie did. Forsaking any hope of reprieve, he decided to go out happy. "Kiss me," he gasped falling over on top of Sal.

The kitchenette figured that the razor beams had been on more than long enough to do their job. After shunting the blue leads to red, it strolled off toward the beam field to sweep up the remains of its former comrades.

"Freddie," Sal mumbled around Freddie's mouth, which was sloppily pressed over hers in a hungry gobble. "Freddie, I think the beams might have stopped."

"Huh?" Freddie jerked his head up, mildly piqued at being interrupted in the middle of fulfilling his dying wish.

"I said, get up off me. I think the beams have stopped." In one easy motion, she pushed him from the floor to his feet. Without using her hands, she hopped upright to join him.

"Was it good for you?" he asked hopefully, dreamily touching his lips. "It was good for me."

"Freddie," Sal gave him a malevolent stare, "cut the crap and get us out of here."

His self-esteem bumping a lifetime low, Freddie lost himself in his work. He checked around for recent signs of beam damage, found none, and concluded they were, at least temporarily out of danger.

After some major rewiring, he managed to start the compactor. Jerking forward, it carried them to safety.

"Well, golly," said the kitchenette finding it hard to keep its voice from registering tickles of disappointment at seeing them still in one piece. "It took me longer than I thought. I mean, really, I'm

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certainly not your prototype master criminal. And it was my first villainous escapade." Using a complete place setting for twelve of its finest sterling silver, the kitchenette spelled out "I'm sorry" on its counter.

"I'll accept that for now," Freddie said, his voice an echoing squeak inside his oxygenator, "but take care you don't let it happen again."

After punching a six-place binary code into each of the vault's time locks, Freddie moved a round handle, and the door popped open. Grinning, he made a gallant, after-you gesture. "Let's collect our booty and get out of here," he said.

Just before he and Sal turned perwinkle blue.

After returning the kitchenette to its hiding place, they took a room at the Stars and Stripes Forever. Washington's largest hotel, representing themselves as off-colored tourists from Fire Island, frequently advertised as the melting pot planet, founded as a place where blacks, reds, yellows, tans (and blues!) could live together in tranquil equality, now famous for the frequent and usually violent changes in its government's hue.

Sal went out on an information-gathering foray and, in due time, returned with two very important tidbits of knowledge. First, their blueness would fade completely away 24 hours after they consumed a small quantity of a common bleaching agent called White Out. Secondly, and of ever greater potential importance, rumor had it that a major drug sale involving a large-scale, shadowy dealer (who else but Weevil!) was to be consummated day after tomorrow at 9 o'clock in the Transportation Section of the Palace of Antiquities.

"How do we take this stuff?" asked Freddie, studying a vial of White Out.

"The pusher who sold it to me said to swallow about half an ounce mixed with Whooppee." A commonly available laxative.

The door buzzed.

Toweling off, Sal slipped into a fluorescent stretch suit, pink to best contrast her skin. "That's probably room service with our Whooppee."

Freddie walked to the door, called out "Who's there?" through it.

"Room service," came the reply.

Freddie opened the door.

To find himself standing face to-face with Lieutenant Father Goulash. "Blessed is the persistent crimefighter," said Goulash, "for he shall inherit two blue crooks." Goulash swooped into the room, accompanied by three VC sergeants, a pick up platoon recruited locally, all wearing the white collar

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of government service and patches showing their rank, all carrying needlers. "I'll take that." Goulash relieved Freddie of his vial.

Sal made a grab for it. "I have to have that. It's medicine. I have a bad heart." She coughed sickly and thumped her chest.

"You have a bad drama coach, as well, my daughter," Goulash replied.

Sal frowned. "Then you know what that's for."

Goulash nodded.

"And you're not going to let us use it?"

He shook his head.

"You're going to leave us Blue?"

"Evidence, my child, evidence. At your trial you own skin will cry out against you. You will stand before the Almighty — and a hanging judge — mutely testifying to your own transgressions." Goulash seemed to mentally slip away. "You'll be hanged by the neck." He rubbed his hands together. "Hanged by the neck until dead."

A sergeant tapped his arm. "Should I clip them, sir?"

The Lieutenant Father's tongue rolled back and forth across his lips. "Swinging to and fro, left, right, left, right, your lifeless hulks balancing the scales of justice."

"Sir?"

"Left .... yes, my son, what is it?"

"Should I clip them, sir?"

Goulash became all business. "Of course. What are you waiting for?"

The sergeant pulled out two sets of elbow clips and advanced in Sal's direction. He never reached her. The blast from a Hand Howie cut him down in his tracks.

Four immense men, all dressed in 3M coveralls, all playing for keeps, judging by the heavy-duty character of their weapons, spilled into the room through the still-open door.

"Murderers!" accused Goulash, pointing to the four intruders. "Praise be to the Lord." Dropping the White Out, he and his remaining sergeants counterattacked with gusto. Freddie jumped behind a lounge chair to put himself out of harm's way. Sal joined him.

"Oh, boy, have we got troubles," Freddie moaned. "First Goulash." He peeked out from behind the chair to check on the battle's progress. "And now a pack of Weevil's goons."

Sal hunkered down and crowded in closer to Freddie, doing her best to make sure a stray shot didn't ruin years of exercise by inadvertently lopping off one of her well-developed bodily parts. "Weevil must have found out it was us who broke into his refinery and deduced what we were after. Now he *has* to eliminate us, even at the

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risk of involving himself with the VC."

A white collar sailed over the top of the chair followed by a smashed Bitsy Bazoo.

Freddie examined the weapon on the off-chance it could be repaired, but it was too far gone. "Too bad," he said, "the Bitsy's an effective weapon when it's working right."

"What does it do?"

"Puts you even with people who already have one."

The chair shuddered as a body crashed into it. Freddie peeked out to check on the combatants.

Apparently, the battle had boiled down to a one-on-one situation, Goulash against a sole attacker.

"In right, there is strength," proclaimed Goulash, the chain from his cross twisted, garrote-fashion, between his hands. He charged.

His attacker side-stepped; Goulash reeled past and, carried by his momentum, sailed through the window, landing, ker-thud, on the street two floors below.

The attacker, an especially ugly, brutish man, kicked the chair out of his way and pointed a Bitsy Bazoo at Freddie and Sal. "Mister Weevil says to tell you hello. And good-by." He flicked the trigger to ready, put his thumb to the rocket release.

A gigantic matzo ball came sailing through the open door, hit Sal and Freddie's self-designated executioner neatly on his crown, and crumpled him to the floor.

Through the doorway stepped the kitchenette, proudly flexing its pneumatic rinsing tube. "I'm back in your good graces?" it asked.

"One hundred percent," answered Sal.

Pausing only long enough to pick up the vial of White Out, Freddie, Sal and the kitchenette beat a hasty retreat.

Sal outlined her plan to them. They would be present at the drug sale, standing by ready to hijack either the drugs or the payment, whichever course of action proved more opportune.

As a first step, they had to set up a cover, something giving them maximum freedom to roam at will throughout the Palace of Antiquities. A visit to the Library and a check through "Fooling All of the People All of the Time," a Washington Army camouflage manual, produced it.

"You're the mystique of tradition," implored the kitchenette. "Think misty, think product, think sell."

Decked out in mod fishnet bloomers, a vinylene shoulder-length habit, and, to complete her disguise, cheek sinkers and an

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off-purple wig, Sal struck an exotic and physically contorting pose, draping her frame over a stuffed horse. She held up a spray can of Wiff-en-poof, the nasal deodorant, and said, "Cheese."

In his guise as ad-art director, Freddie, wearing puttees, vandyke, fright wig, and plaid nose cozie, called for a slightly different angle. "I want to see NOSTRILS. I want to see NOSE HAIRS. Let me STARE right into your HEAD. Make me feel NASALLY PURE."

The kitchenette, fitted out with false light meters and fake lens turrets, and really into the dynamics of its role, ducked around pleading "Hold it," and "Look nasal," punctuating every third statement with "Click."

At 8:40, they had to curtail their activities temporarily when a group of white-collared government servants entered the hall. While they were obviously doing their best to disguise the fact, the pale unfaded patches on all of their sleeves, the mark of a torn-off armband, indentified them all as VC agents. Close on their tail came their leader, none other than Mucilege T. Chuckmucker, President of Washington and, by special fiat of the Crimefighter's Commission, honorary VC Brigadier.

"My golly, the *President*," Freddie muttered incredulously to Sal. Freddie really got hung up on celebrities. "What's the *President* doing here?"

Sal shrugged fatalistically. "I have a sneaking hunch he's here for the same reason we are. Weevil's drug sale. I was afraid the VC might get wind of something this big. And sure enough, they did."

"Oh, my gosh. What do we do now?"

"We wait," said Sal calmly, "and we see."

In a precisely modulated baritone, Chuckmucker ordered his men to disperse. Once they had, he picked up a bullhorn and, using it, delivered a short motivational address instilling in his underlings the overriding importance of inconspicuous behavior in undercover work. Turning then to confront the substantial crowd that had gathered to watch his antics, he bellowed, at a conspicuously full volume, through his horn, "Attention. Citizens. This is your President speaking. Many of you are probably wondering what I'm doing here among you. To that, I say this. Security will not permit me to tell you. So don't ask. However, my being here today is definitely in the best interests of every one of you, fine citizens of this great planet. Of that, you have my word. And because it is for you that I am doing what I am doing here today, I know you will fully understand and give me your wholehearted support

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when I tell you what I'm about to tell you. As many of you know, I'm a member of a minority group." He was left-handed. "So, while I've never actually experienced them from your end, I can fully imagine the hardships that can be imposed by excessive governmental controls. However, at times, our little personal foibles, things like our freedoms of speech, actions and self-determination, have to be temporarily subjugated to the greater good of society as a whole. And that is precisely what is about to happen here. By the authority vested in me by my position as your President, I do hereby mobilize you all and place you under my direct order." He prodded a stoop shouldered old man with his bull horn. "Snap to, there, soldier. There'll be no sluggards under my command. Your duties will be relatively simple. You're all to go about your business, look at the exhibits, and enjoy yourselves. Carry on as if you were in no danger, whatsoever. And that's an order. Anyone not complying will be shot." Smirking sadistically, he shinnied to the crow's-nest of a plastic clipper ship, pulled a telescope from his ceremonial carpetbag, and proceeded to scan the actions of everyone in the hall beneath.

At 8:50, Bull Weevil, disguised in traditional tourist dress, a floppy broad-brimmed hat, red net cloak, porous weave underwear and air pump sandals, entered the Hall and strolled casually from display to display. Apparently, he was too preoccupied with the coming sale to recognize or, for that matter, even notice the presence of Sal, Freddie, or the horde of VC agents.

He trudged across the hall and plopped himself down on a bench fashioned from two antique saw-horses and a hunk of petrified dinosaur flop.

The ersatz ad team exchanged wondering glances. What was Weevil waiting for? Why didn't he make contact? Was he simply being cautious, or had his connection not yet arrived?

At precisely 9:00, Weevil ambled over to a mock-up of an early moon-lander. He leaned in close as if examining every detail of the space-suited manikin perched, one foot in the lander, one foot out. Suddenly the manikin *moved,* reached forward its silver-gloved fist, shoved a large silver sample collection sack into Weevil's outstretched hand, and accepted a slip of paper in return.

"That's it!" came the cry from the crow's-nest. President Chuck-mucker pulled forth a bugle and blew taps (his sleep-teach course in battle technique wouldn't program him to pucker out charge for at least a fortnight). Visions of

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immense point tallies dancing before them, the VC swarmed around Bull Weevil and the ersatz spaceman, and piled on them, pinning them both to the floor.

But the spaceman, a quick-thinking rascal, ignited his jet pack and, in a shower of sparks, soared straight up through a nearby doorway, the slip of paper *and* the sack both clasped firmly in hand.

"There." Freddie pointed toward a nearby brown and white land cruiser shaped like a howdah-topped hot dog. A stencil on its side identified it as a full-scale reconstruction of the good ship *Oscar Mayer*. "Inside."

The two humans and the kitchenette climbed into the howdah. Freddie did some fast-action tinkering, and the *Oscar Mayer* rolled off after the spaceman.

Taking advantage of the general turmoil, Bull Weevil hopped into an Elec Exec, an ancient hulk widely believed to be the first fully mobile desk for the on-the-go businessman, and thundered off after the spaceman, too, trailing a strand of ticker tape behind him.

President Chuckmucker hastily commandeered a nearby Ship of State and packed his men inside. He stepped aboard, one foot on the runningboard, one on the fender, the captain of his destiny, pitting skill and cunning against the forces of evil. "Follow that spaceman," he ordered calmly. The Ship of State lunged accidently into reverse, toppling President Chuckmucker head-first into the rear seat. "I can't see where I'm going," he cried, his legs pumping the air, as the Ship of State headed dogmatically forward.

The spaceman soared out of the Hall of Transportation and into the Penthouse of People Past, where he attempted to make his escape through an archway. Unfortunately, the apparent opening turned out to be part of a snowy holoscopic backdrop depicting Caesar's triumphant entry into Rome. Kashooomp. He plummeted to the floor and laid there, moaning.

Freddie braked the land cruiser to a halt, scurried to the ground, grabbed the sack and the slip of paper, returned, started the wiener, and drove off.

And not a moment too soon. President Chuckmucker, clutching for dear life to the windshield of his Ship of State, squealed around a corner.

Recovered from his collision, the spaceman took several running hop-skip steps, leaping into the air, and flew off after his booty.

"Stop," cried Presidend Chuckmucker. His driver, startled by the bullhorn blasting into his ear, lost control of the wheel and smashed

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into a waxen representation of Jackie Kennedy water-skiing across the Delaware.

His eyes blazing fury, Bull Weevil booted his desk into overdrive, passed the VC by, upsetting a larger-than-life-size representation of the Three Mouseketeers, Porthos, Aramis and Funicello, depicted in their big black ears being harassed by their constant nemesis, feisty old D'Artagnan in his duck suit.

Aboard the *Oscar Mayer* all was jubilance.

"We got it," cried Freddie.

"mmmmmm MMMMMM," said Sal, kissing his cheek.

"Look. Up there in the sky," observed the kitchenette.

Before anyone could stop him, the spaceman swooped in, grabbed the sack and the slip of paper from out of the howdah, and zipped off.

"Halt, you good-for-nothing scoundrel. Halt in the name of democracy." President Chuckmucker sped into view, his Ship of State steaming alarmingly under its load, a wax Jackie Kennedy skiing along behind him, her hand upraised to her forehead in a perpetual stare at the British soldiers awaiting her across the river.

Halfway through Hospital Happenings, the spaceman's jet pack sputtered out. For the second time that day, he fell heavily to earth.

And, again, Freddie grabbed the sack and the paper.

Tottering about in a raggedy circle, the spaceman came to rest on a Blue Crosser, a motorized wheelbarrow used to cart patients from billing back inside to the relapse room. Not much, but better than nothing. He kicked out a glassy-eyed wax dummy, punched the starter, slipped the clutch, and took off.

In the meantime, Bull Weevil, in an expert job of strategic desking, had managed to cut the *Oscar Mayer* off at the Parlour of Salacious Smut. He rammed his desk into it, blowing out its left front tire.

"Come down off of there." Weevil armed himself with the most likely weapons prospect around, a gigantic salami. He brandished it menacingly.

The kitchenette came down first, followed by Sal. Freddie, lugging the sack, the paper between his teeth, came last.

"Over there facing the wall. Line up. Hands over your heads." Weevil took the sack and the paper from Freddie.

"What are you going to do to us?" Sal glanced warily back over her shoulder at him, letting her gaze rest on his salami.

"I'm gonna give you both a little working over to remember me by," Weevil answered menacingly,

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shifting the grip on his sausage.

"Wrong," said the spaceman driving his Blue Crosser out from behind a jumbo black paper-mache mask. "What you are going to do is to drop the salami and pass me the sack and the paper." In his silver gloved hand, he carried an electric vibrator cadged from one of the Parlour's operational audience-participation displays. "I've juiced this up enough to vibrate you all to kingdom come, so don't try anything."

Once he had the sack and the paper revealing the hiding place of Weevil's drug cache, the spaceman forced them all to lie down on the floor with their hands covering their eyes. To facilitate his getaway, he stripped off his cumbersome disguise. While doing so, he delivered a curious, rambling soliloquy. "I'm sure you're probably wondering why a man of my obvious intelligence and gentility would turn to crime." Gloves fell to the floor. "Well, to that question, I have no clear-cut answer, at least nothing which you, as ordinary mortals, could understand." Bang. One boot. Bang. Another. "I suppose I could best explain it to you in terms of my celestial sensitivity." Clank. The suit. "I'm like a radio tuned in to an empyreal station. The Announcer says to me, 'buy drugs.' So I buy them. 'Sell your drugs for profit,' He proclaims. So I do. 'Take that profit, go out, and have yourself a good time because you deserve it more than anybody else I know,' the Announcer tells me in all sincerity." His helmet flew free. "I ask you. What choice do I have. After all, who am I to quibble with the Lord."

"Lieutenant Father Goulash," proclaimed Sal, rolling over to face him.

Goulash dipped stiffly from the waist. He was encased from head to toe in a plastic body cast, his movements completely controlled by a system of hydraulic lines running to hinges built into his neck, arms, legs and waist.

"How did you ever survive a two-story fall," wondered Freddie.

"Ah, my child, at times the Lord works in mysterious ways. Directly below that window, on that ill-fated day, a group of local rabble were parading around for their heathen cause, a scurrilous movement to ban certain types of ..." he blushed, "... clothing on the planet, clothing which I, personally, feel to be an absolute moral necessity. Those protesters had, only moments before, thrown a large colleciton of this ... clothing into a huge heap suitable for burning, when I took my rather unfortunate vertical pilgrimage. Who would have believed that the Lord, with typically apropos rationale, would

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see fit to cushion his humble servant's fall with anything so intrinsically virtuous as a pile of brassieres?"

Jerkily, he made his body cast bounce his head side to side apologetically. "I'm terribly sorry if, in my joyous exuberance, my purely accidental frankness concerning the exact nature of this ... clothing, offended any of you here present, particularly the lady." His cast stiffened. "Enough spell-binding anecdotes about my personal salvation at the hands of the Almighty. Right now, in my role as a small but significant pinkie finger on the Lord's right hand of justice, I have a much more prosaic function to fulfill." He cleared his throat. "Let me see if He's reached a verdict yet." He put his fingers to his temple and concentrated, twisting his head slightly from time to time as if to improve reception. "It's coming, yes, it's coming. Here it is." His face dropped. "Oh, my, I *am* sorry. I don't suppose I could persuade You to change Your mind?" He shook his head. "I didn't think so." He clasped his hands around the vibrator. "I'm afraid He's found you all guilty."

"Would it be too much of an imposition for you to ask Him what it is we're guiltly of?" said Sal.

"Not at all." He tuned in again. "He says you're all guilty of disrespecting one of His earthly disciples." Goulash curtsied stiffly. "He's very strict about that."

"No respect?" chimed in Sal. "You're totally mistaken. All the respect anyone else ever had for you before is only a grain of sand in the desert of respect I have for you now. Only a snowflake in the ...."

Weevil cut her off. "I am a very important egg-sec-u-tiff. More than able to scratch your back if you should scratch mine."

At this mildly perverted suggestion, Goulash swung an arm up, bringing all discussion to a halt. "I really am sorry, but He found you *all* guilty as charged, and, after all, if He can't tell, who can?"

"Did He, by any chance, tell you what our punishment would be?" From Sal.

"Oh, that He did." With a fluid hiss, Goulash twisted one arm up and out, pointing the vibrator in their direction. "But don't worry. I'm sure He'll have mercy on your souls." He pronounced it with a great deal of finality. "He's like that, you know."

Sensing what might well be his last opportunity to do anything, ever, heroic or otherwise, Freddie lunged for the salami, scooped it up, and threw it. More by luck than design, it crashed into the Lieutenant Father's chest, rupturing his hydraulic fluid reservoir. Deprived of fluid, the hinges in his extremities failed. His knees curled

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up, toppling him to the floor.

The fall further aggravated his problems, causing his control system to bend him, arbitrarily, into a series of severely contorted and, worse to a man of his pious nature, humourously off-colored poses.

As his captives scrambled to their feet, Goulash croaked out an entreating plea. "Stop them," he beseeched.

"I don't think Anybody's listening," Freddie tossed off, getting in one cheap parting shot.

"That's not quite true," responded the kitchenette which had, until this time, been standing passively against a far wall. "I'm listening." Popping open a concealed louver, it exposed an outsized and highly lethal-looking laserized meat slicer. "And I'm telling you to stay right where you are and do whatever the Lieutenant Father says to do. Or else."

"You," Freddie uttered. "You've been in cahoots with Goulash all along?"

"That's right, punk." Through with pretenses, the kitchenette lapsed into a gutsy nasal twang that was, apparently, its normal tone and inflection of voice. "Me, Killer Kitchenette, and the Lieutenant Father, here, we is both on the same side of the law. And for those of youse what ain't yet figured out which side that is, that side is the outside. See. So say your prayers, 'cause this is curtains."

Spiral gears pivoted the kitchenette in Freddie's direction. Presumably, because of the threat Freddie's mechanical expertise presented, he was to be the first to go. But as the kitchenette whisked its meat slicer into firing position, it partially blocked off its own field of vision, leaving its left side. the one facing Sal, completely exposed. Without taking the time to figure out what the move would accomplish, she leaped forward, and pounced on the kitchenette, clinging to the back of its storage cupboards, out of reach of all its utensils.

Granting Freddie a temporary reprieve while it concentrated on dislodging Sal, the kitchenette kicked its blender into puree, hoping to shake her loose.

But she clung on tenaciously. "Wwwwwhat ddddddo I ddddddo nnnnnnow?" Her mouth chattered violently. A sudden geyser of banana daiquiris nearly washed her away.

Freddie, who had used the diversion to duck for cover behind a "Physicist's Daydream," a heavy-water bed, answered back, "Snap open the fuse cube in front of you and trip the purple lever."

Soggy lettuce pelted her in the face. Her hands shaking, her position made ever more precarious

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by the fact that she had to hang on one-handed while she worked, Sal eased the fuse cube open.

Changing tactics, the kitchenette baked up some homemade cookies, blew the aroma back at Sal, and mother-mouthed, "Now, you be a good girl and climb down off there, or you'll get no chocolate chippers for dessert," in a hopeful, last ditch appeal to some buried childhood precept. Too bad for it. In the interest of streamlined mental functioning, Sal had voided her memory long ago of soggy and unproductive trivia. Childhood had been the first to go.

She tripped the purple lever.

The kitchenette froze to a standstill, its mechanisms locked in place.

Still shaking, only this time on her own initiative, Sal climbed off the kitchenette and ran to Freddie. He scooped up the silver sack, she grabbed the slip of paper, and together they dashed for the nearest exit.

They almost made it.

"Halt," came the bullhorn roar. President Chuckmucker had arrived. Alone. Halfway between Plowboy's Promenade and The Urban Jungle, his men had mutinied, setting him off by himself in the Ship of State while they stayed behind to dally with a covey of female streetwalkers, later found out to be made of solid plastic. "Halt, or I melt you all into puddles of lard." He'd detoured through The War Room where he'd obtained a nasty-looking black gadget identified by a sign hanging from it as a Flame Flinger.

Obediently, Freddie and Sal rejoined the others.

The Ship of State coughed to a halt and visibly sank three inches in upon itself when Chuckmucher shut it off. Conquering hero style, President Chuckmucker leaped to the ground, hefted his Flame Flinger in one hand, and gestured threateningly across the group with the other. "You people are all under arrest." Immediately after speaking, he broke into a mischievous grin. He leaned forward and cupped his hand conspiratorially to his mouth. "Did that sound all right? Confidentially, this is my first big arrest, and I'd like to get an outside opinion on the image I presented. Do you think I came across as forceful?"

They all moaned.

President Chuckmucker took it for a sigh of approval and straightened up. "Good. By the way, who's that inside the plastic cocoon?" He indicated Lieutenant Father Goulash still lying prone on the floor.

Goulash responded with a sickly croak.

"My goodness," said President Chuckmucker, always sensitive, if

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not exactly responsive, to the plights of his constituents. "I believe that man's injured."

He stepped over to slap Goulash on the back, wish him a speedy recovery, and urge him to remember his kindly old President when election day rolled around.

As soon as Chuckmucker came into range, Goulash, his hinges back in operation on emergency fluid, swung his forearm around and clubbed the startled President in the jaw.

"Dirty politics," protested Chuckmucker falling to the floor.

Crawling forward with surprising speed, Goulash reached the kitchenette, pulled himself upright, and, before anyone could interfere, re-engaged the purple lever.

"Shoot them all," he shrieked.

"Tut,tut. Do unto others as you would have tham do unto you," Sal interjected in a frantic plea to his superego.

President Chuckmucker took a more hawkish stance. He raised his Flame Flinger and fired it at the kitchenette. Unfortunately, he had it pointed in the wrong direction when he did so. Fortunately, though, it had been completely deactivated long ago and did nothing but burp out a few minor sparks singeing his custom-tailored epaulets.

"I said, shoot them," repeated Goulash.

The kitchenette adjusted its meat slicer so it pointed at the whole group, Goulash excepted. Then, unaccountably, it swung its weapon in a shallow arc until it covered Goulash as well. "Get over there with the others," it commanded him.

"But I'm your shepherd. You're my lamb!" reminded Goulash, unable to comprehend what was happening.

"Don't crack wise with me, sweetheart. When I say move, you move. Now move." The kitchenette's voice had adopted the hard-boiled, loose-upper-plated slur popular with Bogey Men, an elitist VC commando outfit based on Casablanca.

"But I don't understand," sobbed Goulash.

"It's simple," said the kitchenette. "I've signaled for reinforcements. I'm holding you all," and in that it clearly included every one of them, "until those reinforcements arrive and we get this mess all sorted out."

With that, it tore off a warming plate revealing to one and all the shiny VC badge and the words Top Kop I embossed on the metal beneath.

A platoon of VC stomped in and surrounded the kitchenette's hapless prisoners.

"That about wraps it up,

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Captain." The kitchenette addressed the VC officer in charge. "Book 'em for me."

The captain nodded.

The kitchenette smacked a ladle self-debasingly across its counter top. "I can't tell you how good it's going to feel to shed this goofy getup and slip into something with a dash more *machismo*. Say, a mass spectrometer or a molecular chromatograph." It started off, pulled up short, and turned. "By the way, make sure those clowns at headquarters understand I'm not to be bothered tonight. See, I've got a date with this dynamite vibrachair. Regular fox. Two hundred twenty volts. 60 amp." It winked the iris on its microwave oven's tuning light. "AC/DC, if you know what I mean."

To heighten the impact of its departure, it spread dry ice around to generate a boiling mist into which it cockily swaggered off.

Freddie, watching it leave, felt an involuntary twinge of admiration. "What a machine!"

"Yeah," Sal said. "Reminds me of a saying I saw written on a station house wall on Tijuana. 'Show me a robot detective,' it said, 'and I'll show you a mechanical dick.'"

"That's enough loose talk," the captain instructed. "Everybody outside.

President Chuckmucker was the first to leave, secure in his knowledge that he would be released, probably with a commendation, most assuredly with reams of good press, as soon as everything got straightened out.

Putting his trust in a battery of lawyers, Bull Weevil pulled his head deep inside his cloak, threw his arm across his face to protect himself from newsmen, and followed.

Freddie and Sal brought up the rear, surrounded by a tightly knit circle of VC.

"Read all about it. Massive drug ring broken," screamed the tape in the corner newshawker. "President acclaimed hero. 3M industrialist and prominent clergyman implicated. Drug shipment nabbed. Two dangerous felons escape from mechanical pen."

Freddie took a slug out of his new shoulder sack and pressed it into the newshawker's slot. The newshawker coughed, shimmied, and disgorged a shredded wad of microfilm. Freddie snarled at the machine and walked on, hurrying to catch up to Sal, loaded down with packages from a fancy womens' clothing store.

"Newshawker back there's on the blink."

"I'm surprised you didn't stay behind to fix it," she teased.

He looked at her in amazement,

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as if she'd successfully read his mind. "Well, I wanted to, but ... er ... but I decided I'd rather, you know, go back to the hotel with you." Over a dinner of stuffed suki yaki, Gorgonzola, and a bottle of Thunderbird '73 in an intimate French restaurant, Sal, tiddly from the wine and *very* chummy, had casually suggested they wile away the remainder of the evening with *pourparler* at the hotel. A hasty whispered consultation with the maitre d' got that translated as colloquy, interlocution, intercourse(!), all of which sounded terrifically exciting, although Freddie, who felt most at home with the basics, suspected the first two might prove a trifle exotic for him. But one out of three wasn't bad.

"Wait until you see what I boosted in that store," Sal said, weaving ever so slightly. "This adorable underwear. Late Bloomers, they're called, For Those Evening Tete-a-Tetes. And I got a Saran Wraparound. Oh, I can hardly wait to try it on."

Smirking at the thought, Freddie reached out to put his arm around her.

"Yes, sir," whispered Sal. "I've got quite an evening planned, and you're definitely going to be the first item on the agenda."

"I am?" Freddie blushed at her earthy candor.

"You bet." She held up her wrist. "You see, I broke my watch climbing over that prison wall this morning, and I thought you might fix it for me while I ...."

Strangely enough, later on — *much* later on — when he finally got around to looking at it, he found out her watch worked just fine.

Coming next month

From Michael Bishop ("The White Otters of Childhood," "Cathadonian Odyssey") a stunning new novelet titled "The Samurai and the Willows," about a middle-aged man and a young woman who share a cubicle on Level 9 in the domed city of Atlanta—a truly different and compelling story which will surely be an award-nominee next year. Don't miss it; the February issue is on sale December 30.

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Haskell Barkin ("Mr. Sperling Bugs Out," July 1974) returns with a brisk and entertaining tale about one of the greatest advertising campaigns of all time: past, present and future.

Time Is Money

by HASKELL BARKIN

The advertising boys were whooping it up one night at the Malamute Saloon, one of their favorite hangouts. They had just come from the annual Advertising Industry Awards Dinner, and good cheer was racing through their bloodstreams.

They spoke of which winners shouldn't have won and which losers (usually the speaker) should not have lost. Then they discussed prospects for the coming year, the sexual proclivities of their waitress, and finally settled into one of their favorite topics, the eccentricity of clients.

After a while somebody noticed that Sam Finnigan had not spoken a word, a rare example of taciturnity that they all felt required explanation.

"What's the matter?" Freddy Katz said. "Being tonight's big winner turn you humble all of a sudden?"

Sam Finnigan's ecology campaign had won the gold statuettes in the 30-Second Television category, Outdoor Display, and Print Media.

"Well, fellows," he said, "I'm convinced you've all had encounters with extraordinary clients. Naturally, I've had a few of my own who would make the hairs stand up on the back of your neck if I told you about them."

They urged him to.

"No, no, I might have at one time," he said, shuffling the three statuettes around on the table. "But a couple of years ago I ran into one client who made all the others seem bland as buttermilk. Unfortunately, I don't think it's something I'm able to talk about."

"Won't go beyond this table," Hank Gilbard said, signaling the waitress for a refill.

Sam took a few thoughtful sips of his drink.

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"Well, maybe you're right. It might just be good for me to get it all off my chest."

With that, Sam leaned forward, pushed the statuettes aside, and began his story.

This took place a few years ago (he said) when Finnigan and Associates was new, unknown, and in debt up to its armpits. One day, as I was sitting around my office wondering who we'd have to let go next, the receptionist buzzed to say that a Mr. George C. Dickens was at the front desk, wanting to speak to me about an advertising campaign.

I scattered old layouts around my desk, put a sheet of paper in my typewriter, and had Mr. Dickens ushered in.

"Make yourself comfortable," I told him. "Be with you in just one second. Gloria, would you bring Mr. Dickens some coffee?"

I picked up a rough for a campaign that never got off the ground, studied it like my life depended on it, and scribbled an okay.

"Now, then, sir, what can I do for you?"

"I would like an advertising campaign."

"That's our business. What's the product?"

"A time machine."

"You mean a wrist watch? One of those quartz jobs?"

"I mean a machine that sends you back in time."

"You have one?"

"Absolutely."

"May I ask what company you're with?"

"No, I'm afraid you may not."

"But of course I can have a demonstration."

"No, but I'll be happy to supply specifications, pictures. That's really all you need, isn't it?"

He smiled, sitting there in his conservative tweed suit, a middle-aged fellow with gray sideburns, veins in his nose, and several important screws loose inside his cranium.

I stood and extended a hand across the desk.

"Well, Mr. Dickens, I appreciate you giving us a crack at the account. But, frankly, Finnigan and Associates isn't into electronics."

"Oh, it has nothing to do with electronics."

"All the same, it really doesn't sound like our cup of tea. So thanks very much, but —"

"I'm not crazy," Dickens said. "But more to the point, I'll be happy to pay you a generous retainer." He withdrew a checkbook. "Would five thousand dollars get you started?"

At that point I became aware of a universal truth. A crackpot is one thing. A rich crackpot is quite another.

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"You have an extensive campaign in mind?" I said. "Print? Television? Radio? Direct mail?"

"That and anything else you might care to suggest."

"I'd say ten thousand would be a more appropriate retainer, Mr. Dickens."

He wrote the check and handed it over.

"I think," he said, "that nostalgia would be the best theme for our campaign. Don't you?"

"Oh, yes," I said, glancing at the check that meant our salvation, praying it wasn't made out in Spanish doubloons. "Nostalgia. Of course that won't sell very effectively to people who want to visit the future."

"My machine only goes backwards. And then returns you to where you started, naturally."

"Naturally. Otherwise it might be a little hard to market."

The check cleared just fine, but it made my lawyer, Ostermund, extremely nervous.

"There are people who take a dim view of attempts to sell a nonexistent product," Ostermund said. "They might even call it fraud and take appropriate legal action."

"Against Dickens?"

"And you. And the newspapers, magazines, and television stations running your ads."

"All of whom have lawyers at least as smart as you?"

"Smarter."

"Meaning their lawyers would advise them not to touch our ads with a ten foot pole?"

"Absolutely."

"So they would never appear, and no one would ever see the material that they might take a dim view of. Which means, in short, I run no risk whatsoever in preparing a massive advertising campaign for Mr. George Dickens."

Ostermund shook his head.

"I would hate to meet you in a dark alley," he said.

A week later I submitted an outline for the time machine campaign to Dickens. He scanned it, then zipped the material into his attache case and said he'd let me know in a couple of days. This he did, in the form of a detailed ten-page memo.

"You can read this at your pleasure," he said, handing it over. "But basically it says you aren't playing strongly enough on people's fears and confusion. The present is hell, Mr. Finnigan. We offer the most powerful form of escape and entertainment ever devised."

It was hard to take Dickens' opinion of the present too seriously. We were having lunch together, and he concluded his statement by biting into a slice of bread laid so thick with butter I nearly gagged.

But when I reread the memo that afternoon for the third time.

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my respect for him increased enormously. I had expected your typical client's misguided view of how a campaign ought to look. I got, instead, a solid, professional analysis. Either Dickens himself was a brilliant advertising brain, or he was consulting with someone who was.

At our next meeting I asked him.

"Of course I'm consulting with other members of our firm," he said.

"It'd be nice to meet them. Their comments are so sharp —"

"Well, mine are in there, too."

"Great. So why don't we all sit down together—"

"We've discussed that, Sam. But our schedules never seem to coincide."

"It seems to me that two or three of us could—"

"Now, about the television spots. I believe that's what we were going to discuss today?"

"Okay. Television." I set the story board in front of him. "Now, this series of sketches roughs in what the TV commercial will eventually look like."

"I've seen story boards before," he said, with an infuriating little smile.

"We begin with this two-shot of a man and woman. Your normal, average couple. They're tense, maybe arguing with each other, although we don't hear the dialogue. Then, zap, we jump-cut to merry England's rolling fields, with a knight and his lady lolling by the side of a stream. We stay on that so briefly it's almost subliminal. Then jump-cut back to the couple. Then to Main Street, U.S.A., circa 1890. Quiet calm. Stay on that shot a little longer than the knight and his broad. Cut back to the couple, who are practically at each other's throats, then to another historical scene. Stay here even longer, then back to the present for a briefer time than ever. End up with a quartered screen showing all our historical shots, and voice over saying, 'How much time do *you* have left to enjoy yourself? Time travelers have all of history.'"

Well, Dickens and his silent partners loved it. I got thirty-thousand more advance, and we went into production. Meanwhile, we were also going ahead with print concepts and billboards.

The campaign was turning into a thing of beauty. Full-page magazine ads they wouldn't be able to take their eyes off of. Not because we were selling a time machine — hell, you could put that in three-point type and get an audience — but because of the sizzle the copy exuded, the artwork that suggested the wonders and joys of times past.

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We were grabbing them by the lapels and saying, "Look, you poor scared, confused jerk, here's the greatest vacation from that dull life of yours that anyone has ever been offered. Sign up now because seats are limited and tomorrow you may be too poor or too dead."

At the same time, one small, prickly idea had been growing in a corner of my brain. When it became too big to ignore, I broached it to Ostermund.

"Ossie, one screwball can imagine a time machine and spend his fortune promoting it. Right?"

"Right," he said, sitting in my office, studying our direct-mail brochure. "This is great stuff you're turning out, Sam. I never thought you were this good. Sign me up for the first flight."

"But how about several screwballs, Ossie? Several screwballs who are so sharp they're helping me turn this into one of the great product-introduction campaigns of all time. A campaign that makes what Ford did for the Edsel look primitive. What's the likelihood that people like that don't really have the product to back it up?"

"A good ad man never believes his own copy, Sam."

"Before the atom bomb, who would've believed a suitcase could blow up a city?" I picked up my pocket calculator. "Would you have believed this ten years ago?"

"Look, a time machine isn't just a bigger bomb or a smaller adding machine. It's a unique species. The man is simply a fanatic who's convinced a bunch of gullible types to invest in his dream. You've taken seventy-eight thousand dollars so far, Sam. Pretty soon now, he's going to wonder why you aren't buying time and space in the media. And when you tell him you can't, watch out."

"But I will buy television time. And pages in *Time* and *Newsweek*."

"Unlikely."

"I'll find a way, goddamnit."

"Why so eager?"

"Because once the public sees this campaign, Finnigan and Associates will have to beat off clients with a baseball bat."

"I hate to say it, Sam. But you've outsmarted yourself."

"We'll see."

But Ostermund was right. I sent the films to the networks and they sent them right back to me. Unacceptable. Unless (as one snotty vice-president put in his note) you'd care to demonstrate the practicality of your product.

I shoved the letter in front of Dickens' nose at our next meeting.

"Impossible," he said.

"Then no commercials. No ads. No nothing. We won't be able to buy a penny's worth of space or time."

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"Sam, we're all very happy with what you're doing, and there's no reason for you to worry about these other things."

"Look, Dickens, has anybody ever taken a trip in this machine of yours — gone back into earlier times?"

My question seemed to amuse him.

"Absolutely," he said.

"Have you?"

"Frequently."

"Then I don't understand. What's the point in creating an advertising campaign that nobody is ever going to see?"

"They will. At the right time."

"When?"

"Sam, please. Just keep on doing what you've been doing. That's what you're being paid for, and that's all you have to be concerned with."

"Dickens, you're not crazy. I'll swear to that. I believe you when you say there's a time machine. So I want to know right now — I demand to know — why you've used it and yet you won't give me, or the networks, a demonstration."

"If you'd prefer to drop the account —"

Suddenly I remembered one of the first things he told me about the machine. That it would only transport you *back* in time.

I had the answer to my question.

"Right now, at this moment," I said, my stomach swiveling around inside me, "are you on a time trip?"

After a long moment he nodded.

"You finally figured it out," he said.

"I haven't figured out anything. I mean, don't you have advertising agencies up there in the future?"

"Absolutely. As a matter of fact, I'm a senior partner in one. After winning the time machine account we worked our butts off trying to create a campaign that would satisfy the client. Nothing clicked until I came up with this one. The client loved it, said it was sheer genius."

"Nostalgia?"

"The real thing. A campaign created for us by an authentic antique advertising agency."

If I was floored before, now I plunged through to the subbasement.

"Finnigan and Associates, you mean? We are authentic antiques? I'm an antique?"

"Of course nobody else was interested. I went to half a dozen agencies before knocking at your door. Sam, you've got a touch of larceny in your soul, and I'm eternally grateful."

"Thanks loads," I said, sinking into my chair. "A campaign that could've made this the biggest

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agency in town and nobody will ever see it."

"Not quite. The world's population, somewhat decreased by the last two wars and the famine of '28, is still a healthy ten and a half billion. And, by the way, real butter is almost nonexistent. Which is why I loaded up my bread that day you thought I was so disgusting in the restaurant."

"Well, I think you're disgusting right now, even without bread and butter! Do you know what's gone into this campaign? My guts! I could've been doing ads that would make me famous. But instead it's all down the drain — wasted on people who aren't even born yet. Well, I don't care to continue. Not this antique. So if you don't mind, we'll call it quits right here and now!"

"And that was how I created one of the greatest unseen advertising campaigns of all time," Sam Finnigan said, taking the last sip of his drink. He scooped up the award statuettes. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a mantel to decorate."

"You cut off Dickens when there was still a buck to be made?" Hank Gilbard said. "Not likely, Sam. Not likely."

"It was a gamble. I admit that."

The boys, who had been preparing to leave, sat down at the table again.

"You see, he was shook up by my tirade. Dickens was basically a decent type and spent a while trying to make me feel better. We went out for a couple of drinks — right here in the Malamute Saloon, as a matter of fact — and after a while we figured out a plan that had something for both of us."

"Namely?" Freddie Katz said.

Sam waved a statuette at him. "Our ecology campaigns make up half the agency's billing. Save our forests, streams, oceans, et cetera, for the future? Well, I have seen the future, gentlemen. And it pays."

SOLUTION TO DECEMBER ACROSTIC

Frederik Pohl: *In the Problem Pit* (Novella from *Fantasy and Science Fiction* — Sept. 1973)

"And then I found myself almost tripping over a rusted, bent old sign that said *Pericoloso* in one language and *Danger* in another.

The sign spoke truth.

In front of me was a cliff and a catwalk stretching out over what looked like a quarter of a mile of space."

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"Book reports" or criticism?

As a long-time reader and subscriber of F&SF, I find myself increasingly irritated by the tenor and attitude of your "Books" writers. John Clute (who and what is a John Clute?) in the October issue is a good case in point.

It is understandable that a critic is tempted to expatiate at length on his personal tastes and criteria, to display his erudition, etc., especially when he is being paid for it. But these esoteric lectures on the techniques of writing and the shortcomings of the works being reviewed as compared with arbitrary standards or the writing of other SF authors serve the intended reader only negatively, if at all. Speaking for myself (and I'm sure I'm not alone), I am turned off by these detailed exegeses of where and how the authors went awry, just as many of my nitpicking high school and college teachers turned me off with their dissections (or autopsies) of much good "classic" literature.

I have no quarrel with analyses of meaning, or with opinions about the author's success or failure in characterization, plot construction and resolution, etc., but these should be from the point of view of a reader, not an academic grading a student's submittal. And who cares about Mr. Clute's (or any other critic's) snide adjectival comments about liberals, New Yorkers, etc.

I think your Books department of late has become more and more an "in" thing for SFWA to show off to each other and, in some cases, to voice personal animus. It definitely has not been either a guide or an information source to me as a reader of SF, and I would guess (again) that I am not alone in this feeling. I get better data on new books from LOCUS, and considering that I have a low opinion of fan magazines, that is a sad comparison for F&SF.

May I respectfully suggest that you give some thought to returning your Books department ot the service of your readers of SF.

—H. G. Sussman

Roy J. Schenck, taking issue with Joanna Russ's review of *The Dispossessed*, suggests "more male chauvanistic pigs reviewing books in the future." I too was irritated by Ms. Russ's review, but I suggest it is not a matter of Sisterhood vs. MCPs. Rather, I think it is a matter of what P. Schuyler Miller called "book reports" vs. literary criticism.

Book reports are designed to help the reader decide whether to read the book. Literary criticism is an intellectual game, an end into itself. (If you're taking votes, I prefer book reports.) Anthony Boucher (reviewing mysteries for *The New York Times*) and of course Mr. Miller wrote book reports. Lester del Rey writes book reports, Newgate Callender, Mr. Boucher's unworthy successor at *The Times*, writes literary criticism. (Mr. Callendar once based a review of a John Dickson Carr novel heavily on Mr. Carr's use of numerous substitutes for "he said.")

Ms. Russ writes literary criticism. If I were to "blame" the difference between her taste and mine on something, I would pick not Sisterhood

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but Ms. Russ's heavy academic background in English. This doesn't always make people incapable of writing good book reports, but it does seem a handicap. Or perhaps Ms. Russ simply doesn't want to write book reports.

—Richard Brandshaft

We have only one side of the question presented in this column, but it is a debate that has been going on for a long time, as noted by Algis Budrys in the November issue, in the first of a regular series of Books columns. (Mr. Budrys will contribute eight columns a year, with the balance to be written by others, including Ms. Russ.)

It seems to me that there are good arguments against "book reports" or a buyer's guide approach e.g.: 1) These are, as noted, available elsewhere. 2) Our frequency and production schedule make it difficult to be as timely as we'd like; and 3) Many books do demand and deserve a broader and deeper discussion. We would be interested in hearing from others on this question.

—ELF

More on Holmes's love life

My son Wade and I feel obliged to comment on two letters in F&SF for September, which challenge our argument in "Sherlock Holmes Versus Mars" (F&SF, May) that Holmes and his lovely landlady, Martha Hudson, were lovers.

To Roderick G. Bates, we respectfully point out that only the excellent but unperceptive Watson argues that Holmes never loved. True, he told Watson as much, and was only courteous to many a lovely lady — because he had the best of love with the best of sweethearts.

Why was Holmes so anxious to lodge with Mrs. Hudson that he accepted a haphazard stranger to share the rent? Why, on returning from his 5-year absence after Reichenbach Falls, did he have a reunion with his landlady before seeing his brother Mycroft or his dear friend Watson? We can give numerous telling references in the Sacred Writings, and cheerfully will do so on request.

As to the letter signed Mycroft Holmes, we are naturally dazzled by such distinguished interest. Yet we diffidently suggest, Brother Mycroft is now somewhere past 120 years old, and must be fixed more than ever in his favorite chair at the Diogenes Club. And even his brilliant mind could be foiled by the circumspect Sherlock. I hope it is not the advance of years that makes him bobble when he denies that Mrs. Hudson's name was Martha, that Martha was another retainer "Sherlock hired from 1917 to 1929" to keep house for him in Sussex. Martha, we know from "His Last Bow" was helping Holmes usefully in thwarting Von Bork. And we hold that it is significant that Holmes made a date to meet her at a London hotel.

We are honored to hear from Mycroft that Holmes noticed us. If, as Mr. Bates recommends, he comes visiting us armed with a gasogene, we will welcome him with a flowing tantalus.

In conclusion, both of us wish Holmes and Martha every joy of a romantic relationship which, we feel, does both of them credit.

—Manly W. Wellman
(Holder of the Baker Street Irregulars investiture, The Dying Detective)

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On Asimov's "The Judo Argument"

Dear Doctor Asimov:

Your recent article in the April 1974 issue of *Fantasy and Science Fiction* entitled "The Judo Argument," was of more than usual interest to me. I think your observations on some arguments for God's existence taken from science accurately put the finger on their weaknesses.

However, I question some of the assumptions and context of the article, namely, that Believers (always capitalized) ultimately have no logical argument for the existence of God and thus, *in practice*, must fall back on raw, naked faith. In the context of your statements on God: the question of whether you believe in him is "moderately annoying," and that you would accept only "incontrovertible evidence for God's existence," the implication may be given that the believer's attitude is groundless and less worthy of rational man. Furthermore, you leave the impression that religion and science are two camps inimical to each other.

Since I am a priest, I come into daily contact with many people who insist strongly that there is a God, and also with many who insist just as strongly that there is not. The question of God's existence has certainly been a strong point of contention throughout human history, however, for the believer to depend solely on raw, groundless faith or for the scientist to depend solely on logic both ignore a very important middle ground.

As a believer, I hold with St. Paul that the existence of God can be inferred from creation. (Rf. Romans 1,20) However, I would like to suggest a different sort of possibility. Some things are known less from logic than from experience. From observations and experiments we can derive an understanding of much of the nature of the universe, and from this point make further logical conclusions, but some sort of experience is always necessary, even if it is only the experience that "I exist." For example, I know from experience that Isaac Asimov exists, I could not construct a logical argument for his existence, however.

It is much the same with God. Mankind seems to have its basic knowledge of God through experience, which I would label with the term "revelation," that is, man knows about God because God has revealed himself. Most people, however, know this "second-hand", through the experiences of others.

Of course, I realize that this brings us into a whole new forest. However, I want to make it clear that I am not referring to "supernatural and psychic phenomena," most of which, I think, has a scientific explanation ultimately. I am referring to genuine experiences of God, which sometimes are strange and mystical (for example, The Transfiguration in Matthew 17, 1-13 et al., or the Resurrection of Christ), but which are usually less dramatic.

The point of this letter is that belief in God rests on more than "blind" faith, even while arguments of incontrovertible logic may not be readily produced. I can understand why believers can sometimes be annoying, especially if their grounds of belief are too naive, but I in turn find it annoying to discuss with atheists whose concept of what faith in God and of religion and of Church are is biased and inaccurate. I hope that in future articles you will note more strongly that the attitude of believers is not necessarily irrational, unless you hold that religion is an

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enemy of science and the progress of mankind. I would challenge that statement, for although I admit "religionists" have had their biased, oppressive and bad moments, in historical perspective faith and the Church have stood up more often than any other institution for human dignity and freedom.

One final comment. You ask the question, "Whose God should I believe in?" The question of God is very deep and manifests itself on many levels of human existence: psychological, cultural, spiritual, moral, etc. For this reason, different races of men in different ages and in different circumstances have spoken quite differently of God and have not exhausted his reality. Your answer seems to flippantly assume that all men must think of God in the same way, and thus avoids the real question of his existence.

— David M. Petras

Dr. Asimov replies:
Dear Reverend Petras,

What you say is very reasonable. If I were to receive a direct experience of the existence of God, even if it were not explainable by the view of the world that is so dear to me it might be called my "faith," then I would accept Him. I have not, however, and to be perfectly honest, I do not expect to. That the loss is mine, I am ready to agree, but I will not accept the experience of others in a matter such as this, where that experience is unamenable to reason. *My* revelation, in other words, but only mine, and, on the other hand, any person's reason.

As to the inexhaustible variety of God, it is not I who refuse to accept that, but all the Believers through the ages who have killed and tortured in the name of the strictest of orthodoxy. Alas, that it should have happened.

Do sf readers prefer trash?

A number of sf writers — Silverberg, Malzberg, Ellison, etc. — have recently said that they have become disenchanted with sf, and that the field (apparently through some inherent fault of its own) has failed them, and that sf readers prefer bad sf to good.

Ellison, for example, detests the use of the sf label on his books, because he says it does not fit the stories he writes and that it unfairly prejudices readers against his work — loosing him sales and wider critical attention. This may be so, but I wonder why an intelligent man like Ellison would want readers so prejudiced that they are unwilling to look beyond the label a book is given, or critical attention from reviewers so bigoted they they pan (or ignore) all work labeled as "science fiction." Must a black man call himself a white to become an equal in present day society? Any description of a sf book's contents would clearly indicate its fantastic nature — if a reader is so prejudiced against a label, in my opinion he probably *isn't worth having.*

Malzberg and Silverberg say that they plan to write no more science fiction. Readers prefer trash, they say. It seems strange for writers to (seemingly) turn their backs on sf, just as teachers and university professors are becoming more and more interested in the field — and it's obvious that these people are after good sf, not bad. Who is to blame for the situation, anyway? Publishers? Editors? Other writers? Readers?

And what can we do about it?

— Cy Chauvin

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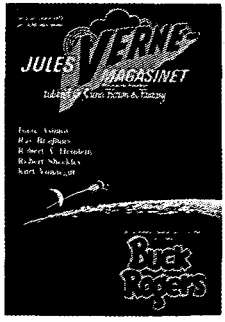

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